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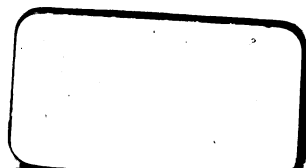
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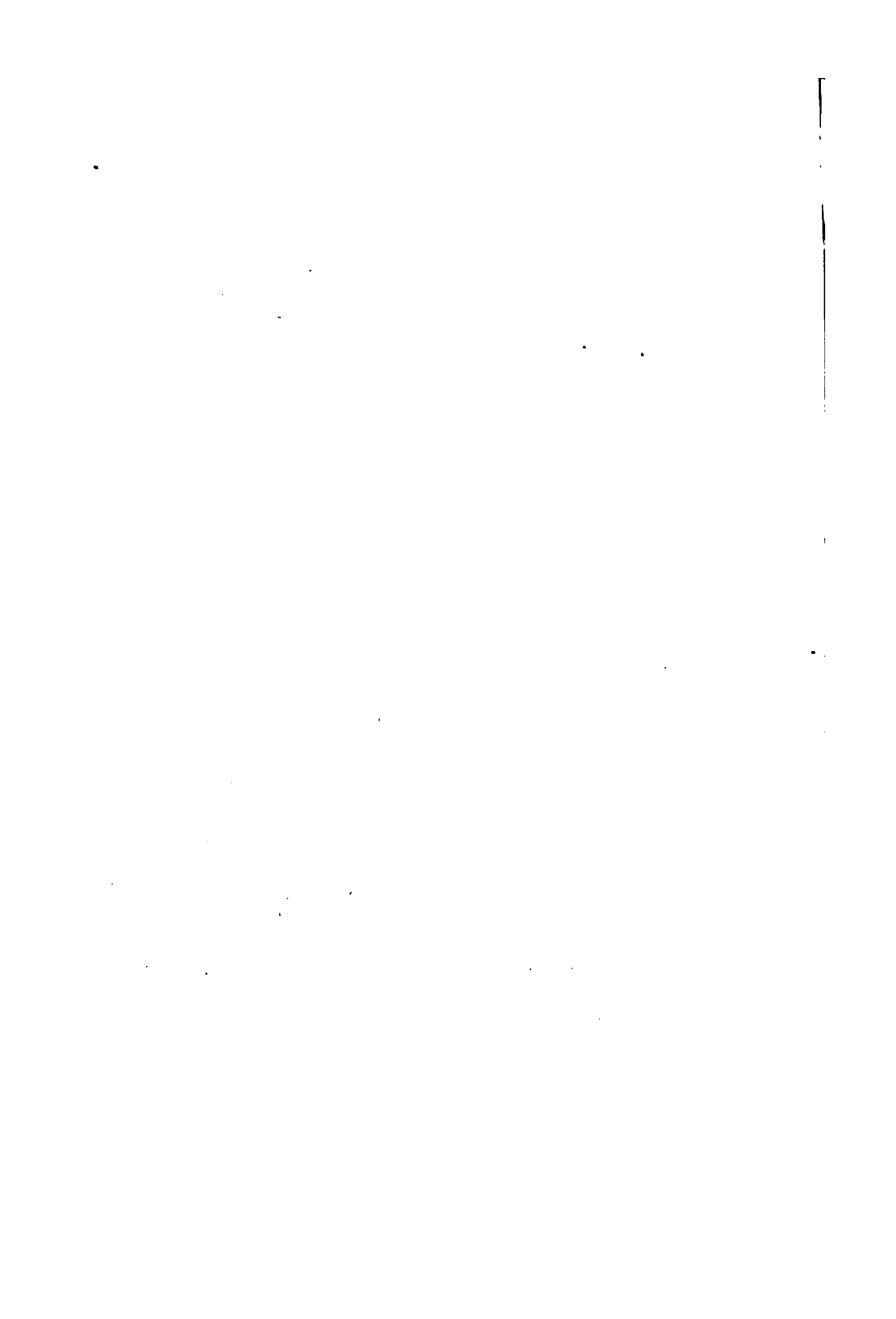




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# NETTLE STINGS;

OR,

## COUNTRY QUARTERS.

A Tale.

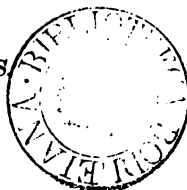
BY A YORKSHIRE PEN.

"That thou art blamed shall not be thy defect,  
For slander's mark was ever yet the fair;  
The ornament of beauty is suspect,  
A crow that flies in Heaven's sweetest air;  
So thou be good, slander doth but approve  
Thy worth the greater."

SHAKESPEAR.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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# NETTLE STINGS;

OR,

## COUNTRY QUARTERS.



### CHAPTER I.

THE REV. CYRIL SHIRKWELL.

“Ehret die Frauen, sie flecten und urben,  
Himmlische Rosen ins irdische Leben.”

SCHILLER.

So sings the great German poet; but there are women, and women. And the experience of most lives testifies to the truth that men may differ widely as earth and heaven; but “women—worst and best—as heaven and hell.” I fear there were few of the heavenly roses in the garlands with which Mrs. Blu’ster encircled Wrinkleburgh. But to our tale.

Gretchen still held the wasted figure in her arms when heavy footsteps ascended the stairs, and Jules, with the doctor, came into the room. There was nothing for the doctor to do—Nellie was dead, and his examination only confirmed that fact. He looked with startled eyes on the corpse, not because it was a corpse, but because, fully believing Mrs. Blu'ster's insinuations, he expected to see a little child.

Her delicate health, her tiny frame, had caused poor Nellie to be often called "my child," by Mrs. Studley, and "my little sister," by Geraldine; but, as she lay there, with the solemn death-look on her brow, it was no child Mr. Senneh gazed upon, and further inquiries elicited from Gretchen the fact that she was sixteen, and was in truth the earl's second daughter. The astonished doctor went back to his house, after promising to send a regular nurse to make the necessary arrangements, while Gretchen and old Jules prepared to sit up with all that remained of poor Lady Ellen Everley.

The next morning wildly flew the news about Wrinkleburgh:—Mr. Senneh had been summoned in the middle of the night—both the earl's daughters were dying—they were

since dead—and they were the earl's daughters after all! How had they died? The fact that half Wrinkleburgh had watched Geraldine and Mrs. Studley depart only a few days before made no difference; dead she was declared to be, as well as her sister—and how had they died? Some said poisoned—the old German woman would do anything; others declared they had been stabbed by that wicked-looking Frenchman. It was in vain that one person better informed (she was the doctor's cook, and greatly she gloried in her sole knowledge of the real facts,) declared that Lady Ellen alone was dead, and that she had died of heart-disease; but even her narrative was embellished with all the wonderful things her master had done before the lady died—"if any mortal man could have saved her, Mr. Senneh would," etc.

Wrinkleburgh insisted upon pouring in crowds into Granite House to see the corpse. Gretchen and Dimarche, in their ignorance of English law and customs, could not prevent the stream of gazers, brimful of curiosity. There was talk of an inquest; a dozen voices at least declared to Mr. Senneh that it was his bounden duty to order one immediately. It was with some difficulty he was persuaded to wait till the earl arrived.

Jules Dimarche, made aware by the other servants of the outrageousness of such a proceeding, violently declared, "that no inquestors or any such cattle should enter the house till my lord came back;" and the subject was set at rest by a telegram, announcing that the Earl and Lady Geraldine would be home that same evening.

Fast they travelled—poor Geraldine, too scared and wretched to shed a tear, repeating over and over again—

"I should not have left her—it is my doing—if only I had stayed!"

Wrinkleburgh could not get over its dismay. All that they had believed of the Everinghams was untrue; Mrs. Blu'ster had taken them in; her stories, her positive proofs, were lies, her insinuations utterly groundless; the earl was an earl, his daughters were his daughters. And they had lived for months, calumniated, rudely treated, despised, and now one of them was dead.

The announcement in the *Times* of the death, suddenly, of heart-disease, at Granite House, of Lady Ellen Everley, youngest daughter of the Earl of Everingham, put the finishing stroke to the repentance of the Wrinkleburghers.

The earliest news of the sad event at Granite House reached Mrs. Blu'ster and caused some dismay. Providence seemed to have interfered, and, with an awful stroke, shattered her lies; but Mrs. Blu'ster was too clever, too unscrupulous, to remain long discomfited. Fertile in resource, quick to see her way through every tangled maze, she seized this opportunity to declare she had never said they were impostors; she might have thought so, other people had told her they were; she had only said they were queer, and so she maintained that they were. Had they not proved it by all going away, and leaving one daughter to die alone? Mrs. Blu'ster had neither remorse nor compassion; poor little Nellie still lay a corpse, and Geraldine sat wailing over her only sister, when Mrs. Blu'ster and her family sat to work to spread fresh slanders, to turn every mournful circumstance, to twist every sorrowful act, into something wrong, to be suspected and talked against.

Mrs. Blu'ster knew Wrinkleburgh well. Had she not for years systematically studied the weak point, the one evil tendency, of each of its inhabitants? So she knew the exact chord to strike in every case; to one—kind-hearted,

unworldly, foolish Mrs. Morris—she dilated on the heartless worldliness of Geraldine leaving her dying sister to go to a grand party at the duke's. Mrs. Morris was a good-hearted, foolish little woman, who had, as she expressed it, "given up the world," and who regarded all fashionable people as necessarily wicked; her compassion for the poor young girl in her grief, vanished, and she was loud in her denunciation of her frivolity.

To Miss Bosjesman, Jane Blu'ster imparted her horror at the bonnet a London shop had sent down for Lady Geraldine. The bonnet was in reality of the plainest description, only its deep blackness and tiny white border were wonderfully becoming to Geraldine's lovely face; this was its fault in Miss Bosjesman's eyes.

So to each, suiting just their peculiar ideas, was something said; and, above all, Mrs. Blu'ster, with her knowledge of the cowardly spirit she had fostered in Wrinkleburgh, let it be fully understood, that any one who was inclined to be civil to the Everinghams, should feel the weight of Mrs. Blu'ster's displeasure; and this, in the then state of Wrinkleburgh, was no slight thing to bear, for had she not for years been in the habit of turning public opinion against any one she disliked?

Nevertheless, some efforts were made. A week after poor Nellie's funeral (she was taken into Blankshire, and buried in the family vault at Everingham, Geraldine and her father returning to Wrinkleburgh immediately afterwards), a few bolder spirits ventured to call at Granite House, and each came away with a report of Lady Geraldine's nice manners and pleasant reception of her visitors.

Among others, called the Rev. Cyril Shirkwell, the new vicar of Wrinkleburgh, who had come to his parish some six weeks previously. He, perhaps from not being a Wrinkleburgh native, and less under Mrs. Blu'ster's control, was loud in his praises of the charming girl who had received him so pleasantly, and listened with such interest to his plans for the parish.

The Rev. Cyril Shirkwell was a tall, good-looking man of thirty-two, with changeable, shifty blue eyes, fair hair, and long red whiskers and beard, on which he bestowed much care. Very proud of his personal appearance was Mr. Shirkwell, and scrupulously particular as to his clerical appointments. The freshest of white ties, and stiffest of wristbands, the finest lawn for a surplice, and the newest of hoods, Mr. Shirkwell always wore; and great de-



corum and good taste did he display in his performance of the service at the fine old church Wrinkleburgh boasted of. A worn carpet, a dirty pulpit cushion, or a crumpled surplice, grieved Mr. Shirkwell far more than actual sin and irreverence; loud whispering, or banging a door—anything that annoyed his taste—was far worse to his mind than scandalous or uncharitable words.

Cyril Shirkwell was the fourth son of an Evangelical clergyman of some repute as a preacher, who, dying young, left his widow in somewhat straitened circumstances; and it was always said how wonderfully well Mrs. Shirkwell brought up her nine children. The six sons grew up tall, good-looking, everything that could be desired outwardly; and they were also amiable, well-meaning, weak men. Easily guided, and relying on their mother as boys, they remained as easily guided, and as incapable of standing alone, in after-life. Very much alike, they had all the same fine figures, the same fair hair, variable, shifty blue eyes, and weak, sarcastic mouths; but with only one, Cyril, will the reader have anything to do.

Brought up at home, with his mother and sisters, Cyril was a great lady-killer in a mild

clerical way. It was wonderful the amount of flirting, hand-squeezing, and ogling, he contrived to introduce into the Bible classes, and prayer meetings, and ladies' committees, that assembled in his mother's house, when he was preparing for Holy Orders. Naturally, when he became curate to his elder brother, who held a large town living, Cyril fell in love with every pretty girl who took to charity and district-visiting to please the handsome curate, and many were the engagements with penniless young ladies of the middle class, that, by his mother's help, he had but just escaped. She knew too well her son's luxurious, rather selfish, nature, to allow him to choose for himself a life of poverty.

When he was but five and twenty, Mrs. Shirkwell and her eldest son fixed upon a wife for Cyril, the well-endowed, good-looking, only daughter of a wealthy brewer, with a fortune of eight hundred a year. That she was four years older than her son was no drawback in Mrs. Shirkwell's eyes, for did not Cyril require guiding in many respects?

Juanita Butler seemed specially made for him—handsome, in a large, rather vulgar, style; pleasant in manner, quick, and good-tempered. Mrs. Shirkwell never found out

that her future daughter-in-law was one of those people who strike a deep observer as too clever by half. Hers was a character so worldly, so calculating in every little thing, that she was liable to be taken in, because any clever person could see that to induce her to follow any line of conduct, you must hold out some advantage; if the bait was only attractive enough, she was sure to swallow it. Is it surprising that through life she constantly found the gaudy fly but covered a sharp hook?

There was no necessity for Mrs. Shirkwell to impress upon her son the advisability of marrying Miss Butler. As a matter of course, he fell in love with her good-looking face directly he was introduced; a brisk flirtation ended, as each of his other flirtations would have ended except for his family's interference, in a speedy offer of his hand, and Juanita Butler and her sixteen thousand pounds became the property of the Rev. Cyril Shirkwell.

The marriage answered very well. Though he was not devoted to her, she was to him, and made him a most comfortable wife. She thought for and advised him, managed his affairs, and took every trouble or worry on her

own shoulders, so that he was never satisfied or happy without her. One thing she would not do, and that was, buy with her money a living for her husband, nor would she relinquish in the slightest degree the absolute control of her wealth. He might and did have every luxury and comfort he fancied, far more than she indulged in herself; but everything was paid for by her, and so she kept the Rev. Cyril on his good behaviour.

When he was thirty-two, the living of Wrinkleburgh was offered to Cyril Shirkwell, through a relation of his wife's, and eagerly accepted by him. He longed for a parish of his own. Hitherto, as a curate, he had been Evangelical, as he had been brought up, and like all his family, and Wrinkleburgh was offered to and accepted by him on that understanding; but, in his heart, Mr. Shirkwell had a leaning to the other great party in the Church. Not that he studied the doctrines of either side, but his taste and his love for æsthetic beauty impelled him to admire musical voices and richly decorated churches.

There is something in the loud vehemence—the, as it were, shouting to heaven—of thorough Puritanism, that grates against a refined mind—and Mr. Shirkwell had a

thoroughly educated taste; to him, vulgarity was far worse than sin.

Such was Mr. Shirkwell when he undertook the charge of Wrinkleburgh, determined in his secret heart to turn Wrinkleburgh into his ideal town. It was a Herculean labour undertaken by a Cupid; yet Cyril Shirkwell might have been a blessing—he had a great opportunity offered to him. Rotten from top to toe was the place, the charities misapplied, the respectable poor neglected, while the least deserving were relieved and petted, and the great show of religion was false cant. Yet here, as everywhere, even in the darkest places of this earth, gleamed “the light of the world.”

In Wrinkleburgh there existed a remnant, though small, despised, and unnoticed, who longed for better things; there lived a few honest, straightforward Christians, trying to walk humbly in the narrow way; they only wanted some one to hold aloft the standard of faith and truth, and they would gather round it. And the Almighty ruler of the world, through his tools—circumstances, was sending to the town the people destined to do this; unknowing of the evil, unconscious of their commission, they came, and the devil trembled for his cherished possession.

Strange to say, gossiping Wrinkleburgh talked little about the Greys before they arrived. True, Dinorlan, the largest house in Wrinkleburgh had been taken for them; but when their servants came, the town was too busy discussing the event at Granite House to give more than a passing notice to the strangers, while those whom business brought into contact with the new-comers were not pleased with the rather scornful tone in which the Yorkshiremen expressed their opinion on the inconveniences of Dinorlan.

Fresh from stately Breffny, the sea-side house and grounds seemed so small, that the butler, a very fine gentleman in the eyes of Wrinkleburgh, declared he didn't believe his people would stay a week in such a "poky hole." Still louder did the old coachman, who had lived with the Greys all his life, asseverate that unless Witney had the stables thoroughly repaired he wouldn't "put no decent horses in such pig-sties."

The visitors who frequented Wrinkleburgh, and inhabited during the summer months the houses near the sea, were, as a rule, clergymen with large families, solicitors and merchants, people of the upper middle class; who,

coming to the sea for their one outing in the year, were satisfied to take things as they were, and cram themselves and their children into small houses, sparsely furnished and inconvenient in many ways. Dinorlan, the inhabitants looked upon as their pride—their one grand house; for had it not nine bedrooms, besides servants' attics, and a garden that was the admiration of all?

Intensely disgusted were they to hear the house run down by the strangers.

"I don't like your North-country people; what business have they to come here? We don't want them," said Witney, and the words were widely echoed by others.

Mrs. Blu'ster did not like the appearance of the new-comers' servants either; the whole establishment displayed too much style to suit her. She desired her town to be visited by rich parvenus, whom she could rule, whose carriages she could use as her own, and whose families she could alternately bully and patronize. Whenever a fresh family, with money, arrived, one of her satellites, in the course of a morning call, would suggest that if Mrs. So-and-so wished to get on in Wrinkleburgh, she had only to offer her carriage to Mrs. Blu'ster, and she would

introduce her all over. This generally succeeded among the class upon which it was tried; the rich merchant's wife, or the opulent solicitor, thought much of the acquaintance of a nobleman's mother; knowing nothing of other noblemen's families, they deemed the Blu'sters perfection, and clever Mrs. Blu'ster reigned supreme.

But there was something very unsatisfactory about the Dinorlan establishment. Mrs. Blu'ster's keen eyes noted that the open carriage that started to bring the family from the station, though well appointed, was neither new enough nor gaudy enough to denote fresh wealth; nor were the horses and servants such as are generally possessed by parvenus; there was an air of comfortable pride, a sort of *ancien régime* savour about the whole thing, that made Mrs. Blu'ster suspect she should not like the expected strangers.

This feeling grew stronger when they did arrive, and she gazed upon stately Mr. Grey, haughty Caroline, and handsome Gertrude; thoroughbred from the crowns of their heads to the tips of their fingers looked the three; and when, some days later, appeared Alfred and George, their appearance did not discredit their race.



Mrs. Blu'ster liked none of their looks, still less did she feel satisfied when it appeared that Mr. Grey was an old acquaintance of the Earl of Everingham, and his daughters made friends with Lady Geraldine directly.

Clarissa Blu'ster, though she, like her mother, preferred a lower class of people, was too eager in her pursuit of a husband to condemn any family where there were two marriageable sons. She was full of plans for making the new-comers' acquaintance, and was even inclined to let the Everingham scandals sleep, till the Blu'sters had obtained a footing in Dinorlan. This, however, was put a stop to by a piece of intelligence conveyed by Miss Canary.

Wrinkleburgh, quick to invent lies, was slow to ascertain real facts, and the Greys had inhabited Dinorlan for a fortnight, had received a visit from Mr. and Mrs. Shirkwell, accompanied by Miss Canary, before much was known about them, except that they came from the North of England—rather a vague way of expressing their origin.

Miss Canary had, however, during her call, gathered a great deal more; and, brimful of her knowledge, she sat in Mrs. Blu'ster's drawing-room, and imparted what she knew—

how the rooms at Dinorlan were wonderfully altered, such beautiful things about, and the tables quite heaped with pretty knick-knacks.

"You would not know the place again, Mrs. Blu'ster; they will be great acquisitions in Wrinkleburgh."

"What, the knick-knacks?" laughed Mrs. Bluster. "If you want them, my dear, you can buy a cart-load of such things at the bazaar here, a shilling a dozen."

"You are so witty, Mrs. Blu'ster, one is quite afraid to speak before you. No; I meant the Greys. I assure you I was charmed. We happened to talk of photography, and one of the young ladies opened a book to show a particular style of portrait, and I peeped into the rest of the book. The names were written underneath each picture, and it was full of titled ladies! I particularly noticed one duchess—a most charming portrait. They are very highly connected. I felt just as if I was again in dear Lord Rotherhithe's house."

"Did you see the sons?" asked Clarissa.

"Yes, dear, I did—one of them; he walked across the lawn while I was there. Miss Grey said it was her brother Alfred, a most distinguished-looking young man—a Guardsman, I believe. He is the eldest, the heir."

"The heir to what?" interrupted Mrs. Blu'ster. Where do they come from?"

"Breffny, in Yorkshire. One of the young ladies showed me a picture of their home—a magnificent place, quite a palace; so delightfully ancient-looking. I adore the antique. Breffny Court it is called."

Why did such sudden pallor overspread Mrs. Blu'ster's comely face? Her complexion looked ghastly, as, summoning her iron resolution, she tried to speak—

"Breffny! near where?—near what town, I mean? Are you sure the name was Breffny?"

"Quite sure. I saw it printed under an engraving. Breffny Court, near Wykeham, Yorkshire; the seat of Marmaduke Alfred Grey, Esquire. Do you know that part of the country, Mrs. Blu'ster?"

Did she know it! Had she not strong reason to know it well? Had she not terrible cause to tremble if any one from Wykeham should come to Wrinkleburgh? And now, if Miss Canary was right, they had come. At the end of her life, as she sat there an old woman of seventy—a triumphant, successful woman too—was the Nemesis that had threatened her career ever since, a girl of eighteen, she

took that fatal step, she committed that one never-to-be-forgotten sin, come upon her at last? Was her life to end in black discovery? It was terrible. Courageous as she was—and with all her faults, plucky to the last gasp was Eliza Blu'ster—she quailed now, though it was only for a moment. Her dry lips forced themselves to answer—

“No! of course I know nothing of such a place. I never was in Yorkshire in my life.”

While Miss Canary ran on about the Greys, their style and fashion, Mrs. Blu'ster made up her mind. These strangers, these Greys of Breffny must not stay in Wrinkleburgh; whatever happened, whatever such a course involved, they must not be allowed to be friends with any one. The Blu'sters must fight them to the utmost of their power; the strangers must be slandered, they must be attacked, they must be driven away. It was no case of jealousy now, no case of dislike to birth and position; it was a fight for life, for the only life of power and influence Mrs. Blu'ster cared to live.

She attended little to Miss Canary's chatter; she left the conversation to Clarissa. She would not ask her visitor to tea, but the moment

she was gone, Mrs. Blu'ster declared to her daughters what she proposed doing. Generally her will was law; violent-tempered as Clarissa was, stolid and obstinate in her own way as was Jane's nature, they both acknowledged the superior cleverness of their mother, and usually, without hesitation, followed her suggestions, but now she met with unexpected resistance.

Jane knew well the harm their slanders about the Elveringhams had done to her own reputation for religion and charity; she was loath to repeat the mistake, while Clarissa would listen to nothing that would render impossible her designs upon the Dinorlan young men; so few marriageable gentlemen came to Wrinkleburgh, it would be madness to offend these two.

Mrs. Blu'ster grew violently excited at these objections; she declared her daughters unnatural children, and asserted that their very existence as a family depended upon the overthrow of these strangers; and when her daughters demanded why, for they could see no reason for her animosity, she burst into tears, exclaiming -

"I am a miserable woman, deserted by my children, who side with my enemies!"

At last she whispered, through her sobs, that if the Greys stayed, she must go away.

"But why, mamma?" exclaimed Clarissa.

"You know, Jane—you must remember, Clarissa—that your father's aunt, the late Lady Blucastle, behaved disgracefully to me; she would not speak to me, she quite hated me; and do you not know she lived at Wykeham, in Yorkshire, that her home before she married was within a few miles of Breffny, this place of the Greys? Mr. Grey's father must have known her—he could not help it. Do you think they will ever be civil to me? Never! I know now why those horrid girls looked at me so superciliously yesterday. They know all about us, I am sure they do. We can drive them away if we like. Remember what we did to the Gordons, those girls you disliked, Clarissa; they had to go in a year. So shall the Greys, if you will help me. If we all work together, we shall succeed. If you will not—if you, Clarissa, will think of your selfish nonsense, and you, Jane, your absurd religion, rubbish as it is—I will go away, and take Lizzie with me; and when the Greys have said what they like, and when they have turned every one against us, do you think young Grey will marry you, Clarissa? or Mr.

Shirkwell let you rule his parish, as he does now, Jane?"

The argument was unanswerable. Jane and Clarissa looked at each other—they had no more to say—and Mrs. Blu'ster had her way.

From that day forth, the Blu'sters began the same system of slandering they had so successfully practised with the Earl's family; of course not in the same words, they were too clever for that. They did not absolutely attack the characters of the new-comers—they only said they were queer, they were not well-born, they were not rich; everything they did was misrepresented or ridiculed; in short, the weight of Mrs. Blu'ster's influence was set determinedly against both Dinorlan and Granite House, and the result was a decided coolness to, and suspicious distrust of, the Yorkshire family.

Most people called once, and kept up a cold outward civility, but they did no more. They invited the strangers to no parties, they asked them to no friendly dinners, they just admitted them as acquaintances, and thought such grudging hospitality, such bare civility, was a great deal to do. They seemed to expect these high-born, proud Northerners to be thankful and pleased that a set of middle-

class people, persons whom, in their own home, they would have regarded as little better than peasants, vouchsafed to allow them to remain in the town.

It is almost too absurd to be believed, but it really took place. Utterly unconscious of the people's folly, Caroline and Gertrude Grey thought their neighbours were shy and stiff because they were afraid of their superiority. The possibility that these lawyers and merchants could regard the Greys of Breffny as inferior to their own vulgar selves, never entered the sisters' heads. In the wish to set the people at their ease, they bore many little slights, because, as they averred, the ignorant people knew no better. Gertrude especially took this view. Caroline, caring nothing for society, unless exactly to her own liking, would have lived isolated, regarding her neighbours no more than the sheep on the common, or the wild birds on the sea-shore. But Gertrude was naturally fond of her fellow-creatures; she declared it was nonsense to be exclusive here; if they drew the line at all, they must draw it at themselves and Geraldine Everley, for there was no one else their equal; they would make friends with every one, and, as she laughingly said, see



something of life—it would be great fun. She had made up her mind to be popular and friendly with all Wrinkleburgh, except the Blu'sters; there she did draw the line. Nothing, both the sisters declared, should induce them to know Mrs. Blu'ster. The latter was right enough in her instinct that the Greys disliked her from the first, though she was wrong in supposing that when they came they knew more about her than that she was undoubtedly, on the face of all her proceedings, a vulgar, low-bred, unscrupulous woman.

Miss Canary, as in duty bound—for, was she not a Blu'ster satellite?—gave the usual hint about offering their carriage to Mrs. Blu'ster, the day she and the Shirkwells called at Dinorlan. This thoroughly disgusted Caroline; inwardly she determined that never a foot should Mrs. Blu'ster put into the Greys' carriage, or even into their garden; and Mrs. Blu'ster, imagining what she did, never ventured a call.

Some weeks passed. The sisters found Wrinkleburgh very dull; they were glad to find it also cheap—they could retrench capitally here. Caroline knew that saving money here would hasten their return to Breffny; and Gertrude looked forward to the 51st Hussars'

arrival at Colchester, thought of Reginald Langley and his hopes, and, being charmed with his love, built ideal castles for her cousin and her new friend; while both the sisters grew very fond of Geraldine Everley, and no day passed without their spending part of it together. The earl was more at home than usual, Mr. Grey's society making Wrinkleburgh more endurable; and Alfred Grey, following his usual habit, soon fancied himself in love with Lady Geraldine.

Gradually a few of the Wrinkleburghers became more friendly; accidental circumstances drew them together. The sisters occasionally visited the cottages, and their kindness and thought for the poor people made them very popular among the few with whom they were brought in contact. Mr. Shirkwell, hearing of this, asked Miss Grey to take a class at his Sunday school. Caroline and Gertrude undertook one between them, and they also initiated Lady Geraldine into charitable ways; she had never been taught to think for or notice the poor till now, when she felt how selfish her life had hitherto been.

Gertrude Grey was Geraldine's special friend. The two were somewhat alike in natural character; the great difference con-

sisted in the bringing up, which had fostered and improved all the noblest qualities in Gertrude, while the earl's system had left his daughter just what nature made her. She grew extremely fond of her new companion, copied her in everything with all a young girl's enthusiasm for a first friend; and the stronger, deeper, more thoughtful nature impressed and moulded the younger girl.

Cottage visiting and Sunday school teaching brought the new-comers into contact with many of their neighbours. The latter still considered them odd, and did not understand why the sisters would not follow their plans, some of which were not even honest. Miss Canary and Mrs. Morris, Miss Bosjesman and Mrs. Shirkwell, were surprised at the indignation expressed by Caroline when they proposed to her to take tickets from the public soup kitchen for her household. This kitchen was supported by the town and charitable subscriptions, and the proposition of such a thing seemed to Miss Grey almost an insult, yet it was not meant as such. Mrs. Blu'ster and her friends had used these tickets for years—they saw no harm in it. This was one of the numerous ways in which the Greys differed from their neighbours.

The Wrinkleburghers had gradually accustomed themselves to such an absence of honesty, such low ideas of honour, such tricky, mean ways, that they had no shame in them; nay, they regarded people with higher feelings as absurd innovators.

Mrs. Blu'ster, of course, heard of Caroline's indignation about the soup, and loudly she complained of the Greys trying to reform Wrinkleburgh. Not that she allowed it would be reformation; she called it radicalism. It was almost a satire upon politics, that Mrs. Blu'ster should call Caroline Grey a Radical; yet she did. Mrs. Blu'ster was a Conservative, at least she always said so, though a more thorough-going red republican, in regard to hatred of every one superior to herself, could not exist; while Mr. Grey belonged to a race of politicians that is now fast dying out: he was an old Whig, a follower of Lord Melbourne and Lord Palmerston, and, Liberal though he was, had little in common with the advanced opinions of Mr. Gladstone and his Cabinet; nevertheless, Mrs. Blu'ster called him a Radical, and in the eyes of Wrinkleburgh, Radicals the whole family became.

## CHAPTER II.

## AN OFT-TOLD TALE.

“Be of good cheer ! Go on, go on,  
Unto life or death ; for both are one  
To the infinite faith in sweet days gone,  
To the infinite love that folds thee ;  
These girlish arms are weak, I know,  
But my heart is strong, as a well-bent bow,  
And whither thou goest, I will go  
In my spirit that upholds thee.”

*Author of “John Halifax.”*

“HER Majesty’s troopship *Alligator*, not being as yet fit for transport service, the 32nd Dragoons are ordered to remain another three months in India, before embarking for England.”

What has this to do with our story ? Something ; inasmuch as the Dragoons not arriving as expected, the 51st Hussars, whom they were to replace at Ashton, were ordered to remain in the latter garrison ; so that nearly

two months elapsed after the Greys came to Wrinkleburgh before the 51st Hussars arrived at Colchester, and Captain Langley coming over to pay his cousins a visit, he and Geraldine Everley met again.

Mr. Grey, scanning the military intelligence one morning at breakfast, exclaimed—

“Reginald’s regiment is on its road.” And Gertrude walked to Granite House, and imparted the news to her friend.

“I say, Jerry, the Hussars are coming to Colchester next Thursday. Are you not glad? Reggie will be over here directly, I know.”

Gertrude knew all about her friend and Captain Langley; for had not the latter, when he came to Breffny to give an account of his business at Wrinkleburgh, imparted to his favourite cousin, Gertrude, all his raptures about Lady Geraldine Everley? Gertrude had been prepared to like Reginald’s love before she saw her; when she knew her well, she loved her for herself.

The two were fast friends. Though no other girl could ever approach the place Caroline held in her sister’s affection, yet Geraldine Everley was more of her own age, besides being by nature more akin to Gertrude;

while to Geraldine it was a first friendship. She was an enthusiastic admirer of bright, noble Gertrude. To her she went in every trouble; to her she had, with many a blush and sigh, confided her liking for Sir Ashton Piers; and to her also she told of Captain Langley's wishes.

Gertrude hoped her friend would marry her cousin, and the congratulatory smile with which she announced the coming of the 51st Hussars was principally for Geraldine's sake, though there was one circumstance connected with that event which she kept carefully hidden in her own heart.

Never a word of Gertrude's first love had Geraldine heard. It was not in the deeper nature of the elder girl to speak of the man who had once been her lover; very few words about him had she ever said even to Caroline. The latter guessed her sister's secret, because she had watched her and Colonel St. John during that one short month in Kent; but Gertrude now hardly ever mentioned his name—never, if she could possibly avoid it; only when she did, her voice lowered, and with a sort of caressing softness came the loved name. Caroline knew her sister too well to ask any questions; she regretted Gertrude's

hopeless affection, but she saw plainly that it was irrevocably given, and that no word from any one would alter it.

"Are you not glad?" repeated Gertrude that morning at Granite House.

"What about?" asked Lady Geraldine.

"Don't pretend to be such an innocent little mouse; what about indeed? About Reggie's coming—Captain Reginald Langley, if you want his full name. You know you will be immensely glad to see him; if you are not, I shall be, for this place is dull. Now, Jerry, confess it is, or are you so taken up with that stupid little curate that you have forgotten Reggie?"

"What nonsense! Besides, I don't call Mr. Forbes stupid."

"Oh! dear no; a most charming fellow; so much to say for himself! Do you know I think you behave very badly to that poor little man; you will torment him to death; for you know, my Lady Geraldine, that you're a desperate little flirt."

"So are you, madam," exclaimed Jerry, putting her arm round her companion's waist.

"My dear, I never flirt with curates."

"No! because you take their rectors, eh! Remember how jealous Mrs. Shirkwell is."



"That is most absurd of her. I always think she is out of her mind with such nonsense. Mr. Shirkwell is the last kind of man I ever care to talk to."

"Ahem! you do a great deal of what you don't like, then."

"Now, Jerry, don't you be absurd. There's hardly another man in the place to speak to, unless I make a raid upon your little friend. Now, would you like that?"

"I'm sure you're very welcome. I like Mr. Forbes; he always seems to me as if he'd been shot, like a cannon ball, out of the Garden of Eden into the middle of this wicked world, and didn't know what to do with himself in it. It amuses me, every time I meet him, to see the mood he's in; sometimes he is delighted to see me, quite absurdly so; sometimes he comes quite close, then turns away, and flies down another street, as if something very black was after him. I like to dodge round the corner and meet him again, just to see his look of horror. I believe he thinks I'm possessed with something evil; don't you?"

"Not exactly. The case is very simple. Alex Forbes has lived two centuries too late. By nature he's a regular Scotch Presbyterian,

and would have fought splendidly behind a ditch in the old Covenanting days. How vehemently he would have lifted up his testimony against the scarves and fringes and other vanities of Claverhouse and his soldiers! Can't you hear him do it, and exhort the faithful to 'come out from among them?' Whenever you and I meet him—and I must say that happens pretty often—I expect him to tell you to 'come out from among' your wicked brethren. I'm certain he thinks us both daughters of Sion, 'walking and mincing as they go, and making a tinkling with their feet.' It is unfortunate he should fall in love with one of the daughters of Sion. As a man, he is desperately fond of you; as a Covenanter and one of the godly, he looks upon you as an emanation of Satan, sent to try his faith. Poor little man! between his love and his religion, he can't lead a comfortable life, his temptation is such a constant one; for, in this little place, if he doesn't absolutely speak to, he must see his tormentor two or three times a day. I don't advise you to go too near him. Some day it will be St. Dunstan and the tongs."

"I declare," laughed Geraldine, "I'll call him St. Dunstan."

"My dear, he wouldn't know what you meant. Covenanters abhor saints. St. Dunstan was a Roman Catholic too, so Mr. Forbes will hold him in double detestation; first as a saint, then as a Romanist. Mr. Forbes, and others like him, have the greatest wish to convert and have to do with Jews, Turks, infidels, and every kind of schismatics (even Mormons), but for the one Church that, after all, most nearly resembles our own, nothing is too bad. I suppose it is because, in intolerance of spirit, Puritans and Roman Catholics are so much alike. Now, Mr. Forbes would have burned heretics, all for the glory of God, just as readily as he longs to pull off your flounces and feathers, and dress you in that dowdy grey stuff with which Miss Bosjesman adorns herself; he considers her a very good woman. Now, would you like to take her as a model for Lady Geraldine Forbes, eh? Depend upon it, Jerry, Reginald Langley is much more in your line; you'll make a capital soldier's wife, and be the pride of the 51st Hussars!

"One thing would make me do it directly; if you would marry another Hussar, and we could always go about together. What fun we would have! Hasn't your cousin a brother

officer he could recommend? Why, Gerty, how you blush; your face is scarlet!"

"Don't talk stuff. Whose face wouldn't be scarlet, and blue, and all the colours of the rainbow, standing before that big fire? I came to see if you would come back with me to luncheon. Will you?"

"Wait here a moment, while I put on my things, and I will," her companion replied, dancing out of the room.

Her pace slackened as she ascended the stairs, and she stood a moment before the toilet-table, looking at her own reflection in the glass.

"I wonder if I am pretty?" she soliloquized. "I wish I was Gerty. She looks so nice, and never seems to have any troubles. Heigh-ho! I wish I could make up my mind. Well, it is no good bothering; something or other will turn up to settle it. I think Alfred Grey would be the easiest to manage."

Then, hastily donning hat and cloak, she accompanied Gertrude to Dinorlan.

As they neared the gate, Alfred Grey came to meet them; they stopped to greet him, and just then Mr. Forbes, with a big book under his arm, appeared. Gertrude would have let him pass, with a bow, but Geraldine stepped

aside, and held out her hand ; the curate took it eagerly.

"Good morning, Mr. Forbes. I want to know what that big book contains. We notice that Mr. Shirkwell or you always carry it about. Is it a sort of baton of office?—a sign that you rule the mighty parish of Wrinkleburgh? Gertrude declares it's a real book, and only a parish register. I say it is nothing of the sort, but a sham volume, like a History of England outside, and a backgammon board in. Does your register contain cigars and brandy-and-water, eh? Now, don't look so shocked; I haven't said any harm."

"I'm not shocked, only I don't understand what you mean," the curate said, as grave as a judge, without the slightest smile on his face. "This," holding up the book, "is the school register. I am on my way to the school."

"To teach the young ideas how to shoot—a charming occupation," drawled Alfred Grey, by no means pleased at the attention Lady Geraldine was bestowing on the curate.

Mr. Forbes was not up to slang; he said simply, "Most of the children are too young to shoot, even if I could teach them, which I can't."

Grey smiled superciliously, while Geraldine could not resist a peal of silvery laughter. The curate looked disconcerted. Could she be laughing at him? He was utterly unconscious of having said anything amusing. Geraldine saw his puzzled face, and said hastily—

“I can’t help it, Mr. Forbes. Did you really take Captain Grey’s words in earnest?” and she laughed again.

“A Scotchman never knows a joke when he hears one,” muttered Grey, over her shoulder, but so loud that Alex Forbes could not but hear. He hated that cool Guardsman with his insolent whispers; what business had he to put his head so close to Lady Geraldine? The latter saw the curate’s indignation, and interposed quickly—

“Captain Grey, how can you abuse the Scotch, when you are a Northerner yourself? You must not do it before me, for I like everything that comes from the North, and the further North the better.” She added, glancing at the curate, “Mr. Forbes, don’t you mean to make a bow for that compliment?”

A gleam of intense pleasure shot into Alex Forbes’ grey eyes as she spoke.

“Thank you,” he said very earnestly.

She interrupted, with a sort of delight in dashing the pleasure out of his face—

“Other things come from Scotland, besides men, you know ;—grouse—and lots of things, specially wools. I get all my wool from Edinburgh ; perhaps you did not know that knitting stockings is an accomplishment of mine. Ah ! you thought I couldn’t do anything so useful. I’m teaching little Mary Black to knit socks for all her ten brothers.”

“Are you ?” he said, looking far more pleased than when she praised his country—for was not this a work of charity, of which he had not believed her capable ? He did not know that she ever did anything but look beautiful ; and very lovely he thought she did look that morning.

“Lady Geraldine, unless you mean to give Forbes a knitting lesson, may I suggest our moving on ?” observed Grey ; then glancing disdainfully at the curate, added, “I would never detain you long in this bitter wind.”

“I’m quite ready to go on. Good-bye, Mr. Forbes,” was the answer.

“Are you very cold ?” he asked anxiously.

“Not a bit,” she said, laughing, “only Captain Grey wants his luncheon ; isn’t it so ?” she went on, walking away by Alfred Grey’s side.

"No! it isn't that," the latter said, looking at his companion, "only I don't know why we should stand all day talking to a parson. I say, Lady Geraldine," he went on, "you don't like that fellow, do you?"

"Gerty, do you hear your brother calling your friend, Mr. Forbes, 'that fellow?'"

"Yes; and I think you were both very hard upon him, poor little man!"

"Ah!" laughed Grey, "defend me from ever being called a 'poor little man.' I'd sooner be said to be a brute. Lady Geraldine, do *you* think him 'a poor little man' too?"

"I never said so. I have a great respect for all clergymen."

"Have you?—well, I have not. My opinion of parsons is about the same as the persons' who composed the prayer that begins, 'Thou, who workest great marvels,' and then asks for a healthful spirit for the bishops and curates. They might have added also—'Send some common sense' to the specimen we saw this morning."

So saying, Alfred opened the hall door, and followed the two ladies into Dinorlan.

Gertrude, when she prophesied that Reginald Langley would soon come to Wrinkle-



burgh, knew well her cousin's disposition. The 51st Hussars arrived at Colchester one Thursday. Langley knew it was hopeless to ask leave from parade the next day, so he waited till Saturday, when there was no parade; by eleven o'clock he was at the station, taking his ticket for Wrinkleburgh.

Emerging on the platform, he was somewhat surprised to hear himself addressed by a voice he little expected—

"Hallo! Langley, where are you off to?"

"Wrinkleburgh, to see my cousins, the Greys."

Colonel St. John looked annoyed. It was no good concealing his own destination, for they were sure to meet again in the Dinorlan drawing-room. He must either go on with the young Hussar, or put off his visit till another day. To the latter he could not make up his mind, so, making a virtue of necessity, St. John said—

"I am on my road to Wrinkleburgh, so we may as well go together. I knew Mr. Grey and his daughters some years ago. As I am in his neighbourhood now, I owe him a call."

"Oh yes, of course; my uncle is a capital fellow," Langley answered with a certain sur-

prise in his eyes, for the colonel did not often trouble himself to be so polite.

"Where did you meet the Greys?" inquired Langley, when the two officers had taken possession of a compartment to themselves.

"In Kent," was the laconic answer.

"Were you ever at Breffny?" asked Langley.

"Never."

His companion was evidently not disposed to be communicative. It struck Langley as odd that he had never heard before that his colonel knew these near relations of his, yet he distinctly remembered mentioning their names in St. John's presence.

"Did you know them well? Isn't Gertrude good looking?" Langley went on, keeping up the conversation from idle curiosity.

"Yes."

A short "yes," nothing more! Was it an answer to the first question, or the last? Puzzled Langley was beginning to speak again, when St. John added—

"What a fellow you are for asking questions!"

"What a fellow you are for short answers! One would suppose there was something mys-

terious about you and the Greys. Perhaps," he went on, little guessing how near he was hitting the mark, "you are one of Gertrude's old flames? One comes across them perpetually; but I thought you were case-hardened?"

"I did not think you were fool enough to talk such nonsense," St. John answered in a low, angry voice, a dark flush rising to his forehead.

Suddenly a strange idea darted into Langley's mind: was it possible, could it be, that Colonel St. John was the lover Gertrude had once told him of—the man who had behaved so badly, the man with the unknown wife? He thought over the colonel's life. He had been married, and separated from his wife for years—that was well known in the regiment—though whether Mrs. St. John still lived Langley did not know. How extraordinary it seemed, that, often as he had thought of Gertrude's unknown lover, he had never once dreamed that he might be his own colonel; true, he might not be, but it looked suspicious. Langley did not remember speaking often to Gertrude of his commanding officer, yet surely she must have known his name; it was all very odd. He wondered was the wife dead, and the widower meaning now to marry Gertrude?

There had been a time when Reginald Langley would have hated the idea of even his colonel, favourite as he was, making love to his cousin Gertrude; now the whole world might marry any one, so long as it left Geraldine Everley for him.

Neither of the companions was inclined to talk much. Langley was anxious, for he did not know how far Geraldine might resent his visit being delayed so long; while St. John had cares enough to furrow his brow, and make his stern eyes at times gleam so angrily, that good-natured Langley looked round to see what could have annoyed the colonel.

Of course when they arrived at Boxworth Station, there was nothing but one old dog-cart to be had, and very much disgusted the two officers looked as they stepped in.

"I vote we leave the old rattletrap to be driven to the inn by that boy behind, and walk from here," suggested Langley, as the horse trotted slowly up the last hill.

"Willingly," exclaimed St. John, pulling the animal up with a jerk that nearly sent its legs flying from under it. The old grey was accustomed to the sort of timid driving indulged in by the elderly clergymen who

visited Wrinkleburgh, and felt considerably surprised at the dashing colonel's firm hand.

"Describe where Mr. Grey's house is, and I'll follow you there presently," observed St. John, as the two walked down the principal street. He thought, "Langley shall tell them I am coming, then Gertrude will not be surprised to see me." The young man heard his colonel's words with glee; he had been puzzled how to go to Granite House without letting his companion suspect his reason. St. John had no idea of Lady Geraldine's existence, but Langley, with the egotism of love, never imagined any one could be unaware of such an important person.

When, half an hour later, Colonel St. John was ushered into the Dinorlan drawing-room, he found both the sisters talking to Miss Canary. But his first question, "Did Langley tell you I was coming?" elicited the fact that the young Hussar had not been there at all.

"What a young scamp that is!" St. John said, as he drew his chair a little away from the window where Miss Canary sat, and turned to Gertrude. She laughed.

"I imagine he has gone to see a great friend of his, and ours too; they will both come presently, no doubt."

Then she dismissed the subject from her mind; in truth, Gertrude could not think of any one or any thing save Charles St. John, now that he sat beside her again. She could not guess why he had come, but it was so delightful to be in the same room with him—to see his dark stern face, and hear the slow drawling voice, that was, in her ears, the sweetest music—that she wanted nothing more.

It might be wrong to be so glad to see him; it might be a duty not to listen; but she could not feel it so. She had never blamed him in her heart; now she was as ready to trust him as if he had never deceived her in actions, if not in words; and she was right. Charles St. John did love Gertrude Grey as he had never, even in his hot youth, cared for any other woman, and when the news came of the death that released him from a life-long penance, his first thought had been that now he was free to marry Gertrude. Not free to love her—he had done that all the time, with the wild longing that men of his temperament feel for a forbidden and impossible possession. He thirsted to tell her that the barrier which had stood between them was gone now, but, short as the explanation need be, it could

hardly be given in the presence of Caroline Grey and Miss Canary.

I do not think St. John had any doubt that Gertrude's joy would not be as great as his own, or that she would require many excuses, or judge his conduct harshly, or refuse his love. No, he felt sure she would receive it willingly, and that once accepted, he did not care for other opposition. Probably, Mr. Grey would disapprove, and Caroline, he instinctively felt, would be antagonistic to his suit. But he was a man accustomed to bear down others by the sheer force of his strong will, and Gertrude's family should consent in the end; so he talked very composedly on general topics, and Gertrude listened, hardly speaking herself, till, in the bustle occasioned by Langley appearing, simultaneously with Miss Canary's taking leave, he contrived to whisper—

“I want to speak to you; offer to show me the garden.”

St. John's words had lost none of their old power over Gertrude. She obeyed him implicitly now, as she had done two years ago, and the two passed together through a French window on to the lawn.

Gertrude's heart beat very fast; instinc-

tively she felt some words were going to be said that would strike her to the soul, but their import she could not divine. She knew she had always felt this man loved her; yet, save that one sentence, wrung from him unconsciously in the agony of parting, as he thought, for ever, he had never spoken a word of love.

Now, his wooing was peculiar, like himself and unlike any other man. He walked out of immediate sight of the drawing-room windows, stopped, looked her full in the face, and said—

“Gertrude, do you love me still, as you used to do?”

His voice was low, stern, almost angry, and strong feeling drew his brows together in a dark frown. What could she say? She knew nothing of what had lately happened; his wife might be dead, or he might want her to run away with him; he did not even say he loved her—he only made that one assertion that she had once loved him, albeit she had never told him so.

A deep blush spread over her face to the very roots of her hair, and she trembled visibly, but she did not speak. It was answer enough. Passionately he threw his arms round her, and gave the first lover's kiss that



Gertrude Grey's lips had ever felt. Then he said, half laughing—

“Don't look so scared, it's all right now. Perhaps you thought me a brute to go away without a word, but it would only have made things worse to speak then; you knew how it was, I saw, and you won't be hard on me now, will you? If I deserve punishment, you won't give it me in the only way I could not bear. I'm free at last,” and he shook his broad shoulders as if casting off some bodily weight. “Gertrude,” he went on, still holding her close, “promise me one thing—say you'll marry me directly. Don't keep me waiting now; these years have been hard enough. You love me, darling, don't you?”

“You know I do,” she said, raising the hand that held both hers, and pressing it against her hot cheek.

“You've liked me all along, ever since we first met in Kent?” he asked again.

“Yes.” Gertrude's trembling voice could not say more, but the word came from a heart almost stifled by the strong sense of relief—relief from an aching weight that had lain there for two long years.

Truly his pardon was easily gained. She asked no questions, she had no doubts; secure

in her trust in him, she felt he would tell her all the past some day. She did not wish it now; the present was only too happy to her; it was joy so intense as to be almost painful.

Up and down they walked, till the gathering shadows of a March evening came on apace; and Caroline, exclaiming that she would be frozen, called her sister in to tea.

In the bright room they found Geraldine Everley, to whom Caroline had despatched Langley with a message of invitation, besides Alfred Grey and his father. Little more passed; the two officers declined Mr. Grey's invitation to dinner, saying they were compelled to return to Colchester that evening; and in a few minutes they took their departure, both of them observing aloud that they should be over at Wrinkleburgh again very soon.

St. John whispered to Gertrude that he would write to her father the next day, and come again the day after; while Langley's expression of the pleasure he felt in being at Wrinkleburgh again, was spoken at Geraldine, though the words were actually addressed to Caroline.

That evening Gertrude told her love story, and warmly combated her father's objections

to her lover, and Caroline's angry lament that that man had turned up again. They saw her mind was completely made up, and eventually agreed that she must have her way. Caroline declared openly that her sister would one day be a neglected, wretched wife, if she married that man, at which Gertrude laughed merrily, and answered, "she would take the chance of that."

Mr. Grey more quietly and reasonably regretted that his favourite child should give her happiness into, as he thought, such unworthy hands.

"You will soon see he is worthy of any one, worthy of some one far better than me," said Gertrude, proudly confident in her lover; and when Colonel St. John's letter arrived, Mr. Grey answered it with a cold assent; though he would not write warmly, he wrote civilly, and that was all the lover expected, so he was quite satisfied.

It transpired that Colonel St. John's first marriage had been a foolish affair, into which he had been drawn by a woman ten years older than himself; their circumstances, their tempers, their very thoughts, had been incompatible from the first, and they mutually agreed to separate years before Charles St. John and Gertrude Grey met in Kent.

That from early manhood he had led a reckless, reproachable, in fact a thoroughly fast, life, was, after all, only what hundreds of other men had done. If Gertrude was fully convinced that this would be altered now, it was no good her father holding an opposite opinion; he could not convince her, and she could not persuade him; nevertheless, the engagement was announced, and the wedding fixed for one day that year.

Gertrude Grey's engagement to the Hussar colonel, and the attraction Wrinkleburgh had for Langley, brought to the little town many of the Colchester officers. Mr. Grey, always hospitably inclined, welcomed the military visitors cordially, and the female element at Dinorlan and Granite House being attractive enough to wile away many an afternoon, Wrinkleburgh became a regular resort of the Hussars, whenever not absolutely engaged elsewhere.

## CHAPTER III.

## THE BLU'STER MANŒUVRES.

"I met my Lady once,  
A woman like a butt, and harsh as crabs."

TENNYSON.

MEANWHILE Clarissa Blu'ster's mind was sorely tried by the society at Dinorlan, and all this coming and going of officers from Colchester ; for did not every day see either Captain Langley, Colonel St. John, or some of their brother officers appear ? Wrinkleburgh had not for years beheld so many gentlemen in the town.

"Marriageable men too," thought Clarissa bitterly. "Why must I have no chance ? If Colonel St. John is engaged to that detestable Gertrude Grey, and her brother thinks of nothing but Lady Geraldine, there are heaps of others. Handsome Captain Langley looks soft enough for anything ; I believe I could

catch him if I had a chance ; at least," her eyes lighted with revenge, " I could get him away from Lady Geraldine. I don't care for mamma's fears, or Jane's ridiculous scruples ; I will try. If I succeed, oh, what a triumph ! If not, I can do some damage to those two horrid girls ; they shall repent coming near us."

So resolved Clarissa, but acting upon the resolution was not so easy. To get on speaking terms with any of the strangers was the first step, and a step that she hardly knew how to take. With all her boldness she dared not venture a call at Dinorlan, and the men were to be met with nowhere else ; they came and went exclusively between Dinorlan and Granite House, and ignored the rest of Wrinkleburgh.

Once Clarissa, passing Mrs. Morris's house, and seeing Caroline and Gertrude there, followed them in. Mrs. Morris would, she knew, upon the slightest hint, introduce her ; and so the little woman would have done, but the sisters gave her no chance. As Miss Blu'ster was announced, Caroline rose, made her somewhat formal adieux, and swept pass the new comer, followed by her sister. It was no good ; and Clarissa, remembering her

mother's warning, for some days remained quiet; but her cup of jealousy was filled to overflowing when she began to suspect that not only was Mr. Forbes, her own Mr. Forbes, as she called him, defecting from herself—that she could have borne, for had not many curates before him defected also—but was actually going over to the enemy, was gradually, timidly, but still visibly, falling in love with Lady Geraldine.

This was too much, and Clarissa vowed vengeance.

“She must, and she would,” as she expressed it, “have a shy for some one, and it should be Captain Langley.” And when Clarissa Blu'ster made up her mind to marry any one, the poor man had a hard time of it; so it fared with Reginald.

One might suppose Langley the last fellow for the attempt; indeed, clever Mrs. Blu'ster would never have begun such a hopeless pursuit, for was he not obviously much attracted by Lady Geraldine? Mrs. Blu'ster saw plainly enough that it was not for his cousins' society the handsome Hussar came to Wrinkleburgh so frequently. Her wish was to steer clear of all the strangers, and wait for better times, but Clarissa had neither

judgment nor patience ; her fierce temper was roused to some action, and, without a word to her mother, she began her plan.

Now Captain Langley knew nothing of the Wrinkleburgh inhabitants beyond their names. He had heard his cousins frequently express their dislike to the Blu'sters, and had himself made a few joking remarks on the personal appearance of the old woman and Jane ; but he did not even know Clarissa by sight, when one day, emerging from Granite House, he espied, walking up the hill just in front of him, a tall, good-looking woman carrying a puppy in her arms, and followed by a black retriever, jumping round and round at the puppy. Langley sauntered slowly on in the wake of the lady ; she walked still slower, and he was close to her, when she turned suddenly with an exclamation of dismay—

“ Oh, what shall I do ? Oh dear ! ” Then affecting to see him for the first time, she stepped to his side exclaiming—

“ Oh, please do help me ; I don't know what to do. Nep will kill it. ” She pointed to the puppy.

Thus appealed to, Reginald could not but answer. He was in a peculiarly amiable mood ; Geraldine had been more than usually



pleasant to him that day; his suit was progressing capitally; he felt pleased with all the world. Good-naturedly he held out his hand for the puppy, praised its little fat face, assuring the lady that her retriever would do no harm—it was all play; and when she reiterated her fears, declaring she did not know how to get the creatures home, Langley offered to carry the puppy, if she would show him the way.

Triumphant Clarissa turned, walked by the side of Langley to Herring Villa, and begged him to come in.

A gleam of fun crossed the Hussar's face when he discovered that his unknown companion was Gertrude's pet aversion, a Miss Blu'ster; and, thinking more of the amusement it would cause his cousins to hear of his visit, than caring what the Blu'sters themselves were like, he followed Clarissa into the drawing-room.

Mrs. Blu'ster was astonished, but she took up her rôle instantly, and made herself decidedly agreeable. Though she mentioned the names of every one of the Blu'sters' good relations to Captain Langley, she did it cleverly and wittily, adroitly flattering her guest. On hearing that the Greys were

his cousins, she said a few words complimentary to them, and regretted not having met them.

"She was getting an old woman now," she said, "and not so inclined to make fresh friends as she had been. Clarissa, dear child, had often begged her to call, the young ladies at Dinorlan looked so nice," etc.

She judged rightly that Langley had heard nothing of the history she feared the Greys knew, and she acted accordingly.

"Whatever Gertrude may say, Mrs. Blu'ster is not half a bad old woman, and Clarissa is decidedly handsome," thought Langley; and he lounged back in his chair, and had a cup of tea brought to him by Clarissa.

She belonged to the class of women who wait upon their admirers assiduously on first acquaintance. In Langley's eyes her style was not high bred, but it was pleasant and very flattering; she was just like the garrison belles he was accustomed to flirt with, a little *passée*, perhaps, but attractive enough to while away an hour or so. That she was worthy to be mentioned on the same day as Geraldine Everley, he would not for one moment allow. Geraldine was the one woman he loved, the one he hoped to marry, the one for whose sake

he would willingly have consented never to speak to another woman; though this was a condition Geraldine would never care to make, for did she not herself talk, aye, and flirt with Alfred Grey, the curate, and a dozen others; her doing so in no way decreased his love for her, though he hated his rivals. It never occurred to him that a slight flirtation on his part with Clarissa Blu'ster would have any effect on his relations with Lady Geraldine; the two were in his mind as far apart as two women could well be. It was simply Langley's nature to show himself off in the best light, to make himself as agreeable as possible to every woman he met, and at the villa he only carried out his usual practice.

Presently the conversation turned on music. Clarissa sat down to the piano and sang in a clear, powerful voice, slightly the worse for wear; then she entreated for a song from him. Langley's voice was one of his great points, and there was for once no insincerity in Mrs. Blu'ster's warm expressions of delight. Then Langley suggested trying a duet; the two voices went well together, at least Mrs. Blu'ster declared they did; and as the song happened especially to suit Langley's deep

tones, he agreed, and two or three more songs were tried before he took his leave, thanking Mrs. Blu'ster for her hospitality, and willingly accepting an invitation to luncheon at Herring Villa the next time he came over.

When he was gone, Mrs. Blu'ster anxiously questioned her daughter, and Clarissa triumphantly detailed her experiment, averring that she at least was not afraid of either the Greys or their cousin. Mrs. Blu'ster sighed.

"Perhaps it is as well to try and be friends, as you say, Clarissa. I will do my best to help you. I hope no harm will come of this."

Mrs. Blu'ster's face wore an anxious look, and she clasped and unclasped her hands in a strangely nervous way for a woman whose pluck had carried her through so many worse perils than this afternoon's adventure was likely to bring.

Clarissa did not care ; she had got her way, she had become acquainted with one of the envied men ; the rest should follow. If she could, if she only could wrest one man from hated Geraldine Everley, she would sell her soul to gain the triumph. That she was risking her mother's name and her family's reputation was nothing to her. She knew of the danger,

but she was reckless. It was always so with Clarissa; she would stake all to win the smallest prize.

Not so, her mother. She, too, was bold; would on certain occasions risk all likewise, but the prize must be in proportion, and to her game she brought natural sharpness and judgment. Clarissa brought nothing but a violent temper and an unguarded tongue. No wonder the mother declared half her life was spent getting her younger daughter out of scrapes. The present was hardly yet a scrape, but somehow the old woman's instinct told her it would become one.

She entered with strange unwillingness into her daughter's plans for the subjugation of Reginald Langley. In the first place, he was above the rank Mrs. Blu'ster liked to tackle. The Blu'ster name and "my son's title," were nothing to Captain Langley, and Clarissa's manner and conversation would ill bear comparison with the soldier's own family and friends; then there were those cousins of his at Dinorlan, and the stories Mrs. Blu'ster still affected to believe about Lady Geraldine. Langley was a dangerous friend for the Blu'sters, and still more dangerous was Clarissa's tongue, if once let loose in his

presence; but it could not be helped now the thing was begun. Mrs. Blu'ster was too good a general not to know that many an impending defeat has been turned to victory by a bold attack, and she threw herself into this, now that it must be undertaken, with as much energy as if it had been her own pet project.

Langley left Herring Villa only just in time to drive quickly to the station, and catch the last train to Colchester, so the Greys knew nothing of his visit to the villa till a week later, when he reappeared at Dinorlan, and considerably startled his two cousins by announcing that he wanted nothing to eat, as he was engaged to luncheon with Mrs. Blu'ster.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Gertrude, "how did you get to know that vulgar woman?"

"By quite a romantic adventure," answered Langley, his eyes twinkling with fun. "I rescued a distressed damsel from imminent peril, and was carried off by her in a fit of gratitude to the enchanted Herring Villa, to be regaled with unlimited tea and Bath buns, and lo and behold!—the enchantress's name was my dearly beloved cousin's great friend, Clarissa Blu'ster! There, Gertrude, what do you think of that?"

"That I thought Captain Reginald Langley too sensible a man to be taken in so easily, and too much of a gentleman to like such vulgar society."

"My dear Gertrude, don't annihilate me with such serious looks. I'll allow Mrs. Blu'ster isn't your style—she savours a wee bit too much of sawdust and spangles. I dare say she began life in a barn, sixpence admittance, and your money returned if the performance does not please. She's a thorough-paced actress, and Clarissa wouldn't do badly at the Alhambra; but what possible harm is there in my going to luncheon with them? I'm not proposing to escort you there, though the old woman did say she should like to make your acquaintance."

"Did she? then she'll not get her wish," exclaimed Gertrude, with, in Langley's eyes, unnecessary vehemence. "May I ask, Reginald, what you expect Geraldine Everley will think of your intimacy with the Blu'sters?"

"Intimacy! what nonsense! why I never spoke to a soul of them, except once. Lady Geraldine won't mind. I wish I thought she would," he muttered half to himself; then aloud, "I don't believe she ever thinks about them."

Gertrude came close to her cousin and spoke quietly—

“Reginald, I don't know, because we never can get at the truth, but both Caroline and I are quite sure some very queer things were said about the Everinghams when they first came here, and we're perfectly certain, in our own minds, that the Blu'sters said them. Now, knowing that, do you think it would be nice of you to make friends of them?”

“Of course if I thought any one of them had ever said or done a single thing against Lady Geraldine Everley, I'd cut my hand off before I'd ever go near the place,” exclaimed Langley; “but,” he added more thoughtfully, “what makes you think they have?”

“Oh, I don't know; a whole heap of things. I can't explain it to you, Reginald. One feels those things by instinct. I can't bear the whole family, and I know they hate us, and Jerry too. You've no business to go to their parties.”

“I don't see what you mean. I believe you've taken a crack against them because they're noisy and vulgar, and rather bad style, so you think them capable of any atrocity. I don't; still, if you and the Everinghams dislike them so much, I'm sure I don't wish to



go near them, only I can't quite see what to do about to-day. I met Clarissa Blu'ster after I put up the trap at the Blue Lion, and told her I would be there in half an hour. What excuse can I make, without being desperately rude; and even you acknowledge they have done nothing you know of to make one insult them."

This was true, and Gertrude could not but admit it; she answered, speaking slowly—

"No, I suppose not, only I don't like it; and I'm sure Jerry will not like it either."

"I'll come away directly after luncheon, and I'll never accept another invitation if the old woman asks me a hundred times. Won't that do?" suggested Langley, brightening up. "And I say, Gerty, you'll tell Lady Geraldine, won't you, that I couldn't help myself this once; make the best of it, there's a dear; don't let her think I like people who don't like her, eh!—you understand?"

Gertrude could not help laughing at his serious tone.

"Very well, I'll do my best; you know I always do for you, but I say, Reggie, if you ever do it again, I'll make no excuse for you."

"All right; catch me going again after this

roust, not I; and Gertrude, suppose we drive to Cove Castle this afternoon? Can't you ask Lady Geraldine to go too?"

"That depends upon when you come back. If you stay half the afternoon at the Blu'sters, we shall start without you."

"I'll be back in time, depend upon it; good-bye," and Langley departed to the luncheon which Mrs. Blu'ster had with great care provided.

There were six guests, besides the Blu'sters and Lizzie Twitch. When luncheon was announced, Mrs. Blu'ster paired Mrs. Shirkwel and Mr. Morris, the curate and Jane, reserving the vicar for herself; then she turned to Langley—

"Now, Captain Langley, you shall choose for yourself whom you will take in." She waved her hand in a sweep that included Mrs. Morris, Lizzie Twitch, and Clarissa. This had the appearance of great friendship, and freedom to do as he liked, but, in reality, as Mrs. Blu'ster well knew, it was only Hobson's choice that was offered.

Mrs. Morris, Reginald had never seen before, and at that moment did not even know her name; while to choose Miss Twitch, a dependant, before Miss Clarissa, would have been an

open slight. Of course he offered his arm to the latter, and taking it as triumphantly as if she had vanquished a host of rivals, Clarissa marched her captain to a seat between herself and her mother.

Mrs. Blu'ster paid considerable attention to the soldier guest, and talked to him frequently ; indeed, her constant allusions to "my son, Lord Blucastle," and "my family connections," though directed to Mr. Shirkwell, were spoken for Langley's especial benefit, the vicar having heard them many times before.

As luncheon proceeded, Langley, somewhat tired of Mrs. Blu'ster's snobbishness, turned to Clarissa with a trivial observation on the garden, and a fine rose that grew just outside the dining-room window.

"Is it a 'Maréchal Niel'?" he asked.

"No," Clarissa answered ; "mamma calls it the Prince William. You know we are descended from William, Richard the First's son."

Now Langley's historical knowledge was not great, yet even he had a distinct impression that Richard of the Lion-heart was childless, and that, in consequence, John succeeded to the throne ; he said as much.

"Oh, then it was Henry the First's son.

I know it is one of the early Norman kings we are descended from," answered Clarissa, with a delightful confusion of Norman and Plantagenet. "I remember his name was William. I think it was a great shame mamma did not call me Williamina."

"Don't you think Clarissa prettier?" observed Langley, thinking neither of the names appropriate to the rather coarse-looking, showily-dressed woman beside him.

Clarissa had no taste in dress—her clothes never matched. If she wore a green dress, she would tie round her neck a pink ribbon, to "enliven" it, as she said; she was always enlivening her attire with some striking contrast. To-day she wore a purple and white muslin, with a number of crumpled green bows dotted over the double skirt, and a green sash tied in baby fashion at the back. In a handsome dark gown, Clarissa might have passed for thirty; in her present youthful flimsiness she looked fifty.

Perhaps it was this that unconsciously made Langley less inclined to swallow her manifestly absurd reiteration of the Blu'sters' descent from Henry the First. He was an unlucky king to choose; but Clarissa's usual listeners were as ignorant of history as her-

self, and she had never before had her kingly ancestor questioned.

Langley, like many another soldier, was no historian, but he never forgot poetry. Vividly before his mind came the ballad he had learnt in nursery days:—"The bark that held a Prince went down," and the refrain, "He never smiled again," that is so pathetic to childish ears. In defence of his boyhood's favourite, he spoke—

"But surely Henry's only son was drowned, crossing to Normandy. Don't you remember Mrs. Hemans' verses about him?"

"Oh!" exclaimed the undaunted Clarissa, "he was never drowned at all, only shipwrecked on a desert island, and not heard of for years. Then he escaped to France and settled at a place called 'Chateau Blue' where we came from, and became 'Blucastles.'"

The story was so complete there was nothing more to be said; though Clarissa did not state how her wonderful progenitor found a desert island between England and Normandy, nor how it happened that the elegant, accomplished Lord Blucastle was not seated on the throne of England. As the direct descendant of the last Norman king, he was clearly entitled to it, instead of Queen Victoria; but that was

a consequence Miss Clarissa seemed to have quite overlooked when she broached her startling narration.

However, Langley did nothing worse than smile rather sarcastically, and, as he thought, stopped the subject by observing—

“Your brother had a little daughter the other day, I saw in the *Times*.”

“Yes, and isn't it very wrong of him? This is their fourth girl, and not one will he call Williamina, nor a son has he christened William. It's absolutely an injury to the family not to keep up the name.”

This was wearisome; and Langley, having had quite enough of both mother and daughter, and not being a man inclined to sit long silent anywhere, addressed his opposite neighbour, Mr. Shirkwell. He, at least, could not talk such rubbish as these women did, thought the soldier; but again Reginald was made to feel the utter incongruity of himself and his present companions.

The parson and the hussar did not fraternise. Mr. Shirkwell never could talk about anything but the Church generally, and his own parish in particular; and, after a few commonplace observations, he startled Captain Langley by asking abruptly across the table—

"How many communicants do you generally have at the garrison chapel?" He received for answer—

"Upon my word, I cannot tell; sometimes a good many, sometimes very few, I believe."

"Oh!" said the vicar—a long-drawn "Oh," evidently meant to express that in his opinion Captain Langley was not often among the number.

Then Mr. Shirkwell relapsed into silence, listening to Mrs. Blu'ster's talk of the parish, and the poor people, and other matters of a goody nature. Ten minutes after, Mr. Shirkwell again addressed the soldier with another question.

"Do you teach in the Sunday school?"

"I!—where?—oh! in barracks do you mean? No; I haven't come to that yet; I thought that was a ladies' business;—isn't it, Miss Clarissa?"

Mr. Shirkwell went on solemnly, thinking only of his subject, and unheeding interruptions—

"I am anxious to get up a staff of male teachers in my schools. I consider that all-important. Would you have any objection to take a class for a few Sundays?"

"Indeed! Really, you must excuse me. I

couldn't, you know; upon my word I shouldn't know what to say to the little beggars. I'm the last fellow in the world fit for it; besides, I'm only here every now and then."

"I've never seen you at church," replied Mr. Shirkwell, to whom it never occurred that a subject so important to him might have no interest to the younger man. "But I saw you last Sunday in Mr. Grey's garden after church."

"I suppose I was taking a weed till they came back from their prayers," answered Langley, in whom the presence of a parson was apt to develop irreverence.

"Did it not occur to you that you might require prayers on your own account?" This was delivered in Cyril Shirkwell's solemnest manner, his eyes raised to heaven as if interceding for this terrible sinner.

"Now, Mr. Shirkwell," interrupted Mrs. Blu'ster, coming to the rescue of her rather bewildered guest, "you must not be hard upon my friend. Young men will be young men; one can't expect them all to be saints; besides, few of them are very good as bachelors, are they, Captain Langley? When you have a nice good wife, you'll be as religious as any one, I'm sure; won't you?" and she smiled;



then rising, she put her arm within Langley's, and walked with him into the drawing-room, whispering—

“ You must not mind our good vicar—he is a little prosy and too fond of sermons, so my Clarissa says ; between ourselves, she isn't very fond of clergymen. Now Jane is just the other way, and will make a capital clergyman's wife, but Clarissa likes something more dashing. I always say, my youngest girl is only fit to be a soldier's wife, she is so handsome and stylish ; and, of course, her old family and good relations would be of vast advantage to any one in the service ; don't you think so, Captain Langley ? The army is governed by interest ; of course Lord Blucastle has immense interest—a peer always has, you know ; indeed, it sometimes quite oppresses me to think whether we do as much as we might with the power that we were born to.”

Mrs. Blu'ster certainly did a great deal with the power she had obtained wonderfully, considering she was born Coastguard Prettyman's daughter ; but it was a great deal of harm, not good, and naturally she never meant to confide that to her visitor.

Arrived in the drawing-room, she handed him over to Clarissa, who seated herself on a

sofa beside him with an air of proprietorship, which, though lost upon Langley, was clearly noted by the other guests. They were accustomed to Clarissa's manner, and understood directly that Captain Langley was henceforth to be considered her property, and woe betide any one who interfered with him.

Reginald stayed perhaps a quarter of an hour, then, considering he had done the whole thing civilly, he rose to leave; but no such escape was possible. Mrs. Blu'ster instantly declared he must stay for coffee, and when he declined, insisted that he must not and should not go without one cup. She had some peculiar coffee she wanted his opinion about; gentlemen who had been in India knew so much about coffee. Langley had never heard this before, and was conscious that, beyond knowing what he liked himself, he was ignorant of the varieties in coffee, and did not care much whether it was good or bad.

The coffee was long in making its appearance; then—having duly swallowed a cup, which looked very black and rather muddy, and burnt his throat, for in his eagerness to get it over quickly he took the whole cupful at a gulp—he again rose to go. This time Clarissa interposed; he must sing one song. Vainly

he pleaded the impossibility of singing directly after luncheon.

"And such a capital luncheon too," he added, hoping that a little soft sawder might hasten his release.

Clarissa loudly proclaimed that he sang so beautifully, she had promised the Morrisises and Shirkwells the treat of hearing him; he must help her to keep her word.

• Mr. Morris was so deaf that nothing short of a cannon-ball fired close behind him could arouse his attention; his wife knew not a note of music, and invariably talked during singing; while the vicar cared for nothing but Gregorian chants; and Mrs. Shirkwell, who sang, thought no one worth hearing but herself. Yet all the Blu'sters persisted that these people were dying to hear Captain Langley, and he could not but consent.

Afterwards Clarissa sang; then she proposed a duet; impatiently Reginald sang through his part; then, determined not to be kept any longer, crossed the room before the last notes of the accompaniment had died away, and bade adieu to his hostess.

Clarissa and her mother followed him into the hall. There Mrs. Blu'ster begged him just to wait one minute, and give his opinion

about an improvement she proposed making in the villa. This she explained at great length, walking first into one room to show how it might be enlarged, and into another to see the effect of a second window there; then she insisted upon Langley coming upstairs to see the view from the staircase window. At length she released him; he gave a last shake of her hand, and opened the hall door.

Clarissa followed outside, insisting on his going over the tiny garden, in which there was nothing to see; then they inspected a coarse-looking retriever, which Clarissa explained had once won a prize—where she did not say; finally, she walked to the kitchen window, and sent a servant for the puppy that had been the ostensible cause of her first speaking to Reginald.

She was certain, she said, the puppy was beginning in the distemper; would Captain Langley look at it?

He did look, and pronounced the creature much too young to have the dreaded disease. Giving the puppy back into Clarissa's arms, Langley stopped a further attempt to detain him, by saying quickly—

“I must go now. I promised my cousins to drive with them to Cove Castle; they will be waiting for me.”

"No, I assure you they have not waited," answered Clarissa, her beady eyes twinkling with spiteful delight, "I saw them go to Granite House for Lady Geraldine, and drive up the hill; they have been gone quite a quarter of an hour."

Langley's face fell visibly; and Clarissa, provoked at the sight, added spitefully—

"You seem to think it a shocking thing that your cousins can do without you for one afternoon; but perhaps it is not the Miss Greys only who have forgotten about you. You had better stay with us, who do not slight our friends so easily."

"There is no slight at all," exclaimed Langley hotly.

At that moment he hated Clarissa: first, because she had told him the unwelcome news; secondly, because she seemed so delighted to tell it.

"It is all my own fault. I said I would be back at a certain time, and of course they were not bound to wait."

"Not bound, but some people would have cared to wait; however, it appears no one did in this case."

Clarissa's temper got the better of her judgment; left to herself, she could not

resist hitting at her rival. Her mother would have stopped her before this, but, alas! Mrs. Blu'ster was in the drawing-room, insinuating, with smiles and nods, that the young people were enjoying themselves together. She did not mind—Captain Langley was a charming young man, and he seemed to think her Clarissa as charming as, perhaps, she thought him.

So the charming Clarissa had it all her own way, and went on—

“Captain Grey is engaged to Lady Geraldine, is he not?”

This with a great appearance of simplicity.

“What a good match it will be for her, and she and your cousins seem such friends. I suppose they will like it, or at least not object.”

“Object! I should think not. Who could object to Lord Everingham's daughter?”

Langley was chary of speaking Geraldine's name. To him it was too sacred to be uttered before this woman she did not like, and whom, since she spoke thus, he detested too.

“There is not the slightest engagement between her and Captain Grey; nor likely to be,” he added, speaking more from his own strong wish than from facts.

"Oh, indeed. I did not know; only I thought no one would go about with him as she does, unless they were engaged."

In her eagerness to damage her rival, Clarissa never heeded the anger gathering in Langley's face.

"Miss Blu'ster, you know nothing of the people you are talking about. I wish you good afternoon."

Raising his hat, and unheeding Clarissa's outstretched hand, Langley turned round, walked quickly away, and breathed more comfortably when the gate of Herring Villa closed behind him. He felt he was at last free.

At last! How tiresome everything had been: the luncheon badly cooked; the guests wearisome; this last conversation with Clarissa abominable!

Yet he had not walked far before he began to think he had been decidedly harsh, almost to rudeness, with Clarissa, who might not know what he felt for Geraldine Everley. She could have no idea how the mention of her name by a Blu'ster annoyed the lover; candour forced him to acknowledge that he had vented his annoyance at being left behind upon the innocent bearer of the news, and he repented his cool farewell. If the party had

been wearisome, it was not the Blu'sters' fault. They had done their best, and certainly paid him every attention, rather too much in fact; he resolved to be doubly polite the next time he met Miss Clarissa, to atone for his surly farewell.

At Dinorlan he found no one but Mr. Grey, who, seeing his nephew's disappointment, good-naturedly forbore to tell him of Gertrude's annoyance at her cousin's conduct, and Caroline's angry denunciations of the Blu'sters. Marmaduke consoled the young man by asserting it would be all right when they came back; Reginald must stay to dinner; he could telegraph to Colchester, and they would give him a bed. But no; the visitor had nothing with him, and, besides, there was a field-day to-morrow.

He waited till the last minute, still they did not return. His road lay for some miles the same way they must take on their return home; he looked anxiously round. Just as his road diverged, he saw in the distance the well-known carriage. He drove quickly to meet it.

"Hallo! where are you going to? this isn't the way to the station," exclaimed Alfred, comfortably seated opposite Lady Geraldine.

Langley sprang down, and going to the side



of the carriage, explained excitedly and rather lamely, that he had gone to Dinorlan a few moments after they had left.

"You might have waited five minutes, Gertrude," he said reproachfully.

"What! for Mrs. Blu'ster's guest!" exclaimed Caroline, and Gertrude more pointedly drove her arrow home—

"You see, Reginald, you did just as you liked; if you preferred Mrs. Blu'ster's party to ours, did you expect us to stay at home all the afternoon?"

"Of course not, but I could not get away; you know I intended to come," urged Langley, speaking to Gertrude, but looking imploringly in Geraldine's averted face.

"My dear fellow, don't apologise; we've done extremely well without you," exclaimed Alfred; "it's been my humble endeavour to make up for the loss of your fascinating presence, and Lady Geraldine will tell you if I have succeeded in the slightest degree."

Langley looked at Geraldine, expecting her to speak, but she sat quite still, and turned her eyes on her parasol, some wild flowers in Gertrude's hand, her own gloves—anything rather than Reginald's face.

"I say, Langley, unless you want to lose

your train, and be missing in barracks to-morrow, you had better look sharp. You haven't half an hour to go six miles in. You know best if the old Blue Lion mare can do it; you'll have a squeak for it. Be off, like a reasonable fellow; besides, we are hungry, and want to get home to dinner, etc."

Reginald put out his hand.

"Good-bye, Lady Geraldine," he said.

She placed her fingers in his, but turned away from his eager gaze, and her coldness froze the words of excuse he longed to speak. He nodded "good-bye" to the rest, jumped into his dog-cart, and was gone, at a pace that considerably astonished the old mare—she was not accustomed to be so hurried. Fortunately she just reached the station in time, without a moment to spare. Langley flung the reins to the boy behind, scrambled into a carriage, and started without a ticket. He reached Colchester, paid his fare, and drove to the barracks, cursing the Blu'ster family, and resolving nothing should take him to another luncheon at Herring Villa.

Langley knew nothing of Clarissa, or her mother, when he resolved to keep clear of them for the future; keeping clear of them soon became a moral impossibility.

Every time he went over to Wrinkleburgh he met Clarissa Blu'ster on his road from the Blue Lion to Dinorlan. He did not know that she daily perambulated that road on purpose to catch him, and he could not prevent her turning round and walking with him to the gate of either Dinorlan or Granite House, whichever he was bound for.

Again, if ever he stirred outside either gate, he was certain to meet Mrs. Blu'ster, accompanied by Clarissa. With extreme effusion they always greeted him, and his distinctly shown coldness had no effect; indeed, if anything, it seemed to increase their almost affectionate words. It was provoking, but it could not be expected to have serious results. Not a word beyond the most trivial commonplace did Langley ever speak, so he reasoned, what harm could their absurdity bring? If it was an amusement to them to speak to him continually, really they were welcome to do so, though, for his part, he thought their acquaintance wearisome.

All this time he seemed gradually drifting away from Geraldine Everley. He could hardly tell how it happened—he saw her as frequently as before, but somehow he never saw her alone. Whether this was pure chance

or her contrivance, he could not make out. She talked to him as frequently as ever; but again, there seemed a difference—that he felt, though he could not analyse it.

When he came over joyfully to announce that the day was fixed for the long-anticipated Hussar ball, she expressed pleasure, but in a very quiet, sober way, and when eagerly he asked her to promise him the first dance, she agreed, but so coldly that he felt as rebuffed as if she had refused point-blank.

A few days later, he told her of another intended amusement—a wonderful piece of gaiety—actually a charity ball to be held in the Wrinkleburgh Town-hall. Geraldine merely replied—

“Mrs. Blu’ster told you, I suppose;” and he felt annoyed that he could not deny that the old woman had been his informant.

As day after day passed, Reginald felt more and more strongly that he must delay asking Lady Geraldine to marry him. She would refuse him he felt sure, and yet he had done nothing to cause the change. He waited, and put it off, and hoped for a better chance, and tried to hint his love without asking for a definite answer; and tried, too, to make Gertrude a go-between. The latter,

however, was busy over her own love affairs. She did not mean to neglect Reginald, and was willing enough to help him, but other thoughts and other hopes filled her mind, and her cousin's love-making naturally gave way before her own. She had not time to watch him, and she hardly noticed that he was anxious and dispirited.

## CHAPTER IV.

### BLUCASTLE PARK.

“ Marion ! why that pensive brow ?  
What disgust to life hast thou ?

\* \* \* \*

’Tis not love disturbs thy rest,  
Love’s a stranger to thy breast ;  
He in dimpling smiles appears,  
Or mourns in sweetly timid tears,  
Or bends the languid eyelid down,  
But shuns the cold forbidding frown.

\* \* \* \*

While that icy aspect chills us,  
Nought but cold indifference thrills us.”

BYRON.

Two events happened before the much-talked-of Wrinkleburgh charity ball, a ball originally proposed by Miss Hardress, and cordially supported by the Blu’sters as a means of further promoting the pursuit of Langley.

One event gave rise to the other, for had Gertrude not persuaded Lady Geraldine to accompany herself, Caroline, and Mr. Grey to

London for a week, to be spent in buying dresses and making arrangements for her own marriage, Mrs. Blu'ster would not have succeeded in the plan that was destined to affect the whole course of Langley's after-life.

Directly Mrs. Blu'ster heard of the projected London visit (and she heard of it, as she did of everything else in Wrinkleburgh, the instant it was settled), she despatched a note to Lord Blucastle, asking him to come over and see her immediately upon an important matter;—she would tell him all when he arrived.

Another note went by the same post to Colchester:—Her dear son, Lord Blucastle, was going to Colchester next Monday (the day the Dinorlan party were to start for London), and she and Clarissa proposed accompanying him. Would dear Captain Langley let them rest in his barrack quarters for an hour or two, while Lord Blucastle was engaged elsewhere. She would not ask it, but both she and Clarissa wished so much to see the 51st Hussars on parade, etc.

Langley, of course, wrote back saying he should be happy to see Mrs. Blu'ster and her son and daughter, and hoped they would take luncheon in his rooms.

Meanwhile Lord Blucastle rode to Wrinkleburgh. He wondered what his mother wanted; probably to ask for more money, and the peer resolved not to be wheedled out of a farthing this time. He had only come to Blucastle a few days before to shoot his coverts for the first time that season; and Lady Blucastle was left in town with her last baby and the other children.

Mrs. Blu'ster welcomed her son warmly, but with a certain air of patronising importance she was not wont to assume when she wanted money. Almost immediately she began—

"John, I sent for you to tell you a piece of news it is right you, as the head of the family, should know. You will, I am sure, be glad to hear that Clarissa has a very good prospect of marrying extremely well—a charming young man, most highly connected, related to half the peerage, John, besides being in a crack regiment. It is a chance that has never come before. I must say he is quite devoted to Clarissa."

"More fool he, if it's true," muttered Lord Blucastle. He had doubts of his mother's story. It was not the first time she had told him a falsehood about Clarissa's prospects.



In his heart John was persuaded that Clarissa's only prospect was to be a sour old maid, and he had more than once told her so plainly; for John, like his mother, was not apt to mince matters, and spoke his mind with a coarseness that jarred unpleasantly on ears polite.

"My dear John," exclaimed Mrs. Blu'ster, "it is all but settled; he is just on the point of asking her."

"Then he hasn't popped yet? I call that counting your chickens before they are hatched," and the peer laughed loudly. "I'll bet two to one he never does. Clarissa is always making a fool of herself."

"John, I think you much underrate your sister, and it is very wrong of you in your position." And Mrs. Blu'ster drew herself up as if the whole family had been insulted in the person of Clarissa. "I assure you he is only waiting an opportunity; that is what I sent for you about. I want you to give Captain Langley an opportunity of proposing to your sister in a proper way, suitable to our family and position."

Rough as Lord Blucastle was, he liked to hear of his family and position. Mrs. Blu'ster knew what she was about.

"Well, I'm sure I'd be glad enough to see anybody take Clarissa off your hands, mother. What do you want me to do? Hand my sister over to the fellow, and say, 'Take her and be happy.' It's precious little happiness he'll have with her temper; but that's his business, not mine."

"I think they have every prospect of happiness," Mrs. Blu'ster said loftily, ignoring her son's joke. "The proper place for Clarissa to receive her lover's attentions is Blucastle Park."

"Oh! I dare say. My house, indeed! Come, I call that good! Can't a man pop the question to a woman without wanting my house to pop in?" and he threw himself back in his chair, laughing uproariously.

"John, you really are so coarse, I can't talk to you" (this in high dudgeon); "you have no proper feeling for your sister."

"I'm feeling for the poor devil she's contrived to catch, or nearly catch, as the case may be. Dangling about isn't hooked, I can tell you, mother; and hooked isn't safe in the landing net, either. But there! I'll do what I can. You tell Clarissa she can go to the Park when she likes, as long as she doesn't want me in it at the same time."

"Thank you, dear John. I knew you would be kind, as you always are." (Mrs. Blu'ster said nothing of his coarseness now.) "What we ask, is for you to give Clarissa and Captain Langley an opportunity of meeting at Blucastle."

"Well, let them meet as often as they like; if that's all."

"But it isn't quite all, my dear John. I want you to invite Captain Langley to spend a few days with you. You might ask him to shoot next week." The old woman laid her hand on her son's arm, looking coaxingly in his face. The blandishment was lost on "dear John."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," he exclaimed. "Do you think that I'm going to have a parcel of dandy officers lounging about my place, wanting French dinners, and horses to ride, and a set of flunkeys to wait upon their noble selves? Not a bit. I shall have my own friends; good rough fellows, who like their beer and plain roast meat, and finish off with punch and good clay pipes. These fine soldiers would be calling out for champagne, and expect cigarettes fit for a lot of women. No, no. None of your swells for me! I can't think how you contrived to catch

a swell between you ; but you had better keep him out of my sight. I don't think he'd admire his brother-in-law. Don't be cross, mother," he went on ; for Lord Blucastle, though rough and coarse, was not a bad fellow, and was worth his mother a dozen times over ; "I'll give Clarissa five hundred pounds the day she marries, and a small cheque beforehand to buy her some new clothes. There ! You can't say I haven't done my best."

"No, indeed !" Mrs. Blu'ster's eyes sparkled at the thought of the offered money. Suppose Clarissa did not marry Langley, and the old woman had strong doubts about it, the money should be squeezed out of Lord Blucastle in any case ; but this was not the point immediately required, and Mrs. Blu'ster stuck valiantly to her present design.

"But, my dear son, just listen. I'm sure Captain Langley will like you, and the liking will be mutual ; but we wish him to see Blucastle, it is such a fine old place. Of course we are proud of it, and you the owner too. You want some people to shoot your coverts. Pray ask Captain Langley, and any one else you choose. There is Mr. Stretcher and Major Turbot, you knew in Australia, and there is the naval man at Fisherwick, captain of the Coast-

guard, I mean ; he is not at all fine, but his name sounds well. Those will make quite a charming party."

"I won't have you and Clarissa bothering me at Blucastle," sullenly answered the owner of the Park. "I'd enough of that when I couldn't help myself. I should not mind these fellows you talk of, if it were not for you two coming besides."

A sudden inspiration came to Mrs. Blu'ster ; she saw her way to victory. She exclaimed quickly—

"We never meant to come. Clarissa and I do not want to see Blucastle. I only suggest you're being a little civil to this nice young gentleman. I dare say a bachelors' party will be as pleasant for him."

"I thought you talked of Clarissa and he meeting?" John could not fathom his mother's ultimate meaning, yet he had an idea she was trying to take him in.

"Afterwards, dear John, when he knows Blucastle, perhaps we may go over there for a picnic or two, and take our own luncheon, and eat it in your superb dining-room."

Lord Blucastle liked to hear his possessions called superb, though he knew the speaker was only doing so for a purpose of her own.

Mrs. Blu'ster noticed his pleasure, and added—

“If you will ask Captain Langley to come to Blucastle next Tuesday for a week, that is all we want, and you will be a dear good son and brother.”

“You'll promise not to come yourself, or send Clarissa? Mind, mother, I won't have either of you.”

“I promise faithfully.” (Mrs. Blu'ster never minded a lie.) “Why, I declare we haven't dresses, or anything ready for such a visit.” (“That must convince him,” she thought.)

“Very well,” said Lord Blucastle, “then, I'll write to the fellow.”

“No, dear John, come over with us to Colchester next Monday, and ask him yourself.”

“Oh, bother Colchester! Are you going?”

“Yes; Captain Langley has asked us all to luncheon to see his quarters. You know, John, that is where Clarissa may have to live after they are married.”

“Well, upon my word, I do believe the young man means something after all, or he wouldn't have troubled himself with you for a whole day, besides providing prog.”

The squatter nobleman was not hospitable;

he supposed Langley as unwilling to spend money upon others as he was himself. The offered luncheon decided him; had he been expected to provide a meal for himself, his mother, and Clarissa, no power on earth would have taken him to Colchester; as it was, he consented sulkily.

"Well, if I must go, I must. I can see what our future brother is like, and ask him to shoot. If he comes it will be all right; if he doesn't, why I've been civil, and there's no harm done."

Mrs. Blu'ster and Clarissa drove to the Colchester barracks. By artfully suggesting that a hansom would save at least sixpence (a strange reversal of fact)—"I am not rich, you know, John"—the old woman persuaded her son to walk from the station, and thus she secured for herself a quarter of an hour's conversation with Langley, unheard by John.

Langley's welcome to his visitors was hardly spoken before Mrs. Blu'ster began—

"My son, Lord Blucastle, will follow us directly; he is coming to the barracks especially to ask you to join him to-morrow at Blucastle Park for a week's shooting."

Langley was beginning a polite refusal,

muttering something of a "previous engagement," and being "on duty," etc., when she continued—

"I'm so sorry none of us can be there, not even Clarissa, for we have some engagements that cannot be put off, despite the pleasure of meeting Captain Langley, but I may tell you a little secret;" she laid her hand in a motherly way on the young man's shoulder; "Lord Everingham and his daughter are to be there."

Langley looked amazed. He could hardly believe he heard aright. Mrs. Blu'ster resumed—

"You did not think we knew them—no more we do—but my son has met Lord Everingham several times at different places, and he has written a note to ask them."

She did not say that the only places where the two noblemen had met were various race-courses, and that their conversation was confined to the earl on one occasion, during the Sandown Park Meeting, taking the odds against a horse, offered in stentorian tones by the colonial peer; but she added in a whisper—

"Do not say anything about the Everinghams to Lord Blucastle; my son is a little peculiar, he will never acknowledge he has

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invited any one to his house till they have accepted. He has not yet received Lord Everingham's answer, but I know for a fact, through a mutual friend at Wrinkleburgh, that they mean to go to Blucastle, and I thought you would like to know this." (Mrs. Blu'ster smiled knowingly.) "It may make a difference in your answer."

It did make all the difference: to secure spending a week under the same roof with Geraldine Everley, Langley would go anywhere. Blucastle Park would become a paradise, if enlightened by her presence. Fortune favoured him at last, and another of her favours was the promised absence of Clarissa Blu'ster, whom Langley had begun almost to hate, as a constant source of Gertrude's displeasure, and perchance too she had occasioned Geraldine's late coldness.

It occurred to Langley that Blucastle Park was the last place on the whole earth where he should have expected to meet the latter, but he never doubted that she would be there, for Mrs. Blu'ster spoke with extreme certainty of the fact. Reginald did not think a woman could lie so deliberately.

The handsome soldier believed himself to be an adept in women's wiles; he was pre-

pared for plenty of duplicity and tricks, but he had never met a Mrs. Blu'ster before. Her bold assertions deceived him completely; and such is human nature, that now, when the Blu'sters offered him a chance of meeting Geraldine, they immediately became in his eyes quite different people—Mrs. Blu'ster absolutely good-natured, and Clarissa decidedly handsome. With thanks he expressed his sense of Lord Blucastle's kindness, and when that distinguished nobleman arrived, Langley received him most cordially, and so eagerly accepted the proffered invitation, that John was at last convinced that his mother had spoken the truth, a thing her son was always disposed to doubt.

Perhaps it was this unusual filial feeling, or that he really was glad for his sister's sake, or perchance his walk had roused his appetite, that caused John, Lord Blucastle, to enjoy his luncheon, and appreciate, in rather an alarming way, the regimental wines. As he expressed it afterwards, "he pegged into the captain's viands, and made the bones look small."

It must be confessed he paid for his repast by amusing his entertainers. Langley had invited two other Hussars to join the party,

and to them the squatter lord was an object of curiosity. His appearance alone was a source of fun; under middle height, with a considerable amount of ungainly strength, and large development of stomach, "dear John's" figure was not improved by a Norfolk jacket, made very short round the hips, and tightly pinched in round the thick waist, while his enormous legs were displayed rather than encased in grey knickerbockers and stockings of broad Rob Roy pattern.

Downe whispered to his subaltern—

"I should like to span the fellow's calves. I bet they measure twenty inches."

"I bet you couldn't get thirty inches round them without squeezing," was the reply; "he's a pre-adamite formation."

Lord Blucastle's conversation, though not elegant, was original. He had his mother's wit, and in society, where he was not afraid of his company, kept every one in a roar of laughter; to-day he surpassed himself. Mrs. Blu'ster tried to interpose, and Clarissa looked angrily disgusted, confiding to Langley, that her brother had lived so long in the bush he was quite a savage; but Downe and the subaltern appreciated the fun heartily, laughed uproariously at the somewhat coarse jokes, and

capped his Munchausen-like stories. After luncheon, the two carried him off with them to billiards, and unlimited brandy and soda.

Langley longed to go too. If Lord Blucastle was coarse, he was at least amusing, whereas Clarissa was dull, hardly opened her mouth, and contented herself with making eyes at her supposed lover; nevertheless, the Hussar was bound to entertain the ladies. Wearily he escorted them round the barracks, showed the mess-room, the men's quarters, and conducted them round the stables, a sight the 51st Hussars were proud of, for was not their regiment a model to other less favoured corps?

Presently they came back to Langley's rooms for a cup of tea, which they drank while he went off to inform Lord Blucastle that his womenkind were ready to depart; but my lord was not so inclined, nor were his hosts inclined to part with him. Such a development of nature as the owner of Blucastle Park did not often come in the Hussars' way. With something of the feeling of having caught a live gorilla, they pressed him to stay and dine at mess; Downe in his hospitality offering the guest a shake-down on his sofa, if he would send for his traps.

"Lord love you ! I want no traps," exclaimed "dear John." "Haven't I slept night after night in the bush, with my saddle for a pillow, and a couple of snakes for bed-fellows ! Do you think I want a clean shirt to-morrow ! Lor' ! I've gone six weeks, and never taken mine off my back, and it a flannel one, and not over clean to begin with ; as for hot water and shaving soap, and such like, you might as well ask for satin vests and otto of roses ; a dry rub with sand does just the same."

It was well Clarissa did not hear, or she and her mother would not have gone so contentedly back to Wrinkleburgh, leaving John to stay at Colchester and to return to Blucastle next day, accompanied by Captain Langley.

"We'll drive straight to Bingley Wood ; the keepers shall meet us there, and we'll not go to the Hall till we've had a day's shooting," John observed. And when Langley repeated this to Mrs. Blu'ster, she smiled in approval ; for did not this make her previously settled plan easier to carry out ?

Langley and Lord Blucastle, leaving Colchester by an early train, arrived at Bingley Wood before twelve. There they met a couple of John's friends, two keepers, a retriever,

and a dozen beaters. These latter were rather a ragged regiment. Lord Blucastle was not liberal in his shooting arrangements, and his keeper had to collect waifs and strays : old men let out of the workhouse for the day, young lads, glad to shirk any work, and doing their beating in the idlest fashion. There was one stalwart idiot, who invariably took the wrong line, and was within a hair's breadth of being shot dead half a dozen times. As fortune would have it, he escaped with only a severe peppering from Lord Blucastle ; and when he displayed the shot marks, the peer laughed loudly, and proffered the magnificent compensation of sixpence.

The sport was not bad. Pheasants were plentiful and ground game abundant. It was the style of management that aggravated Langley. The ex-squatter had no idea of sporting courtesy, as practised among gentlemen. A dozen times, at least, he shot a bird as it rose straight before his guest. He marched his friends over a turnip field, where they shot two brace of partridges before they discovered that the shooting over that particular field belonged, not to their host, but to a neighbour. And the host himself laughed gleefully, as he told of the ownership, and

himself fired at another partridge, and bagged a couple of hares, averring that to pot his neighbour's game was a capital joke.

Major Turbot and Mr. Stretcher, accustomed to the Blucastle ways, did not care, but Langley hated it, and felt ashamed of his companions. Yet he was perforce compelled to hold his tongue, and walked along, silently reflecting that, however shabbily Lord Blucastle managed his sport, the evening with Lady Geraldine would make up for all.

Nothing had been said of the expected guests, and Langley, restrained by a sort of dislike to talk of his lady-love before strangers, never mentioned their names till the shooters were crossing Blucastle Park, picking up a stray rabbit every now and then, as they walked slowly over the rough grass.

"I suppose Lord Everingham will have arrived," Langley said, addressing his host.

"Arrived where?" John naturally asked.

"At your place—Blucastle, I mean."

The peer looked as if his soldier guest had taken leave of his senses.

"What should bring that old fellow here?" he said, coolly.

"I thought—surely I cannot be mistaken—I understood Mrs. Blu'ster to say they were

expected," answered Langley, a suspicion dawning on his mind that he had been deceived.

"They! Who the dickens do you mean? There is no one at my house but Ballard of the coastguard—I expect he will have just arrived; and Smithson comes to-morrow; it's only a bachelors' party. You'll have to take things in the rough; you don't mind, I hope."

"Oh no, certainly. I am sure everything will be very comfortable," answered Langley, who began to see that Mrs. Blu'ster had been playing a deep game. Still, she was a woman; he could not denounce her manœuvres to her son. Perhaps it was overstrained chivalry; but, angry as he was with the deceitful old woman, Langley was not the man to display before these strangers any woman's tricks, and further words were stopped by their arrival at the Hall.

A fine old place was Blucastle—a stately pile of grey stone, venerable, yet substantial; a place that suggested a long line of ancestors and a knightly name. In its present aspect, it likewise suggested neglect and a penurious owner. A rough hurdle fence divided park from lawn; the grass on the



latter was ragged, plentifully bestrewn with dandelions; the broad gravel sweep was sandy, deep rutted, and sadly requiring re-gravelling; and of the flight of broad stone steps to the front door, many were soiled and chipped. The whole exterior, like its owner, looked rough and ill-cared for.

Inside, things were much the same. Lord Blucastle led the way into a hall of vast dimensions, but cold and cheerless by reason of scanty furniture and dim lighting. The outside November fog penetrated here; a miserably small fire smouldered in the huge grate, sending up a volume of the greyish white smoke that betokens cheap coals and recent lighting. The guests stumbled their way in the semi-darkness, till a door opened suddenly, showing a welcome stream of light, and, to Langley's astonishment, Mrs. Blu'ster's voice exclaimed—

“Here you are! Come in, Captain Langley, you must be shivered to death. Clarissa, look after them all. I must say one word to John.”

She checked her son's angry exclamation by a quick gesture, and drew him back, while she motioned to the other men to enter the room.

“John,” she whispered, “don't say a word;

I will explain it all. Come with me," and she retreated rapidly upstairs, followed by her son, muttering anything but blessings on his mother's appearance despite her solemn promise.

A *mauvais quart d'heure* had Mrs. Blu'ster, but she bore it patiently. She knew John would have his say; she knew likewise that he could not actually turn her out of the house; and, strong in the nine points of the law—possession, she allowed him the gratification of railing at her abominable trick, and declaring he would disclose the whole to Langley. John might threaten this, but his mother felt he could not act upon it. He raved, he stormed, but to no avail; there sat Mrs. Blu'ster, and there she would stay during the rest of Langley's visit, and the master of the house could not prevent her, nor could he either prevent her taking upon herself to be mistress of everything during her stay. John had to submit, and Mrs. Blu'ster gained her point.

Meanwhile Clarissa welcomed Reginald, ignoring completely his two companions. Langley almost smiled as he reflected how these two women had taken him in. Where was Lady Geraldine, whose promised presence

had lured him hither? Probably at Wrinkleburgh, hearing that he was actually staying with the Blu'sters at their house (Langley knew nothing of the London expedition, which had been settled somewhat hastily), while here, in bodily presence, sat Clarissa Blu'ster, the woman he had resolved to avoid.

Avoiding her was now out of the question; here she was, and he must accept the fate which doomed him to Clarissa's presence during the rest of his stay at Blucastle; and doomed, too, that Clarissa should make love "at," not "to" him all the time.

Had she liked him, or even pretended to do so, it might have been endurable—for handsome Langley was prone to consider it simply his normal condition to be petted and adored by womankind, with the exception of the one woman he himself adored. She did not pet, or make much of him; perhaps that was the secret of her power over his passionate, weak nature. When Geraldine was present, he had thoughts only for her; but, that being a state not often to be attained, Reginald had no objection to a little mild flirtation with another; but he hated to be the recipient of Clarissa Blu'ster's coarse love-making. She never tried to please him; she made no

assumption even of believing he liked her; she only sat as close as she could to him, and perpetually stared at him; she followed him round the room, and addressed every observation she made to him, taking no notice of any one else.

When Mrs. Blu'ster reappeared alone—for Lord Blucastle was too angry to meet his guests amiably, and retired to his own room to smoke away his disgust—Clarissa would hardly allow her mother to speak to the supposed lover. She kept him continually by her own side; the dressing-bell rang—she lighted his candle with her own hand, and proceeded upstairs to show Captain Langley to his room.

Langley descended to the drawing-room in irreproachable dinner dress, to find that the other men had exchanged their shooting-coats for grey morning suits, while the host had merely put on a tail coat, which had a singular effect combined with knickerbockers and shooting boots; but Lord Blucastle cared nothing for appearances, and he whistled and exclaimed—

“My eye! you are coming it grand!” when Clarissa swept in, gaudily arrayed in pink and white, followed by her mother in black velvet.

Of course the old woman desired Langley to take Clarissa in to dinner, and equally of course the young lady giggled and laughed, and pressed affectionately but heavily on the arm he proffered. Langley found himself seated between Mrs. Blu'ster and her daughter, and amused himself with watching the scientific way in which the old woman made a hearty meal out of the somewhat scanty eatables.

It was not that there was any absolute want, and the dishes were numerous enough, but each dish contained just enough to give an appearance of having something on it: first course (for seven people), one pair of small soles at the top; entrées, three mutton cutlets in a wall of potato, two rissoles in a sea of gravy, and four oyster patties; to these succeeded a boiled neck of mutton at the top, and a roast sirloin of beef at the bottom. John liked to carve for himself, and plentifully helped himself, and sent the thinnest of slices to his guests; but Mrs. Blu'ster, on the principle, "it's many a mickle makes a muckle," partook of every dish. The sweets were the same; a moderate help, taken by any one person, would have emptied each dish; yet the bill of fare looked ample—a cabinet pud-

ding, half a cold cherry tart, two custards among seven people, and three jam sandwiches. Langley remembered Major Ponto in *Punch*, and thought his host might have given the renowned major a lesson.

Perhaps incited thereto by a remembrance of the Hussar mess, John allowed one bottle of champagne, which just went round once, with an extra glass that Mrs. Blu'ster secured ; but after the ladies retired, the host came out better ; the wine, such as it was, circulated freely, and John, Lord Blucastle, certainly amused his guests.

The men were in no hurry to rejoin their female entertainers. Major Turbot and Mr. Stretcher were old friends and boon companions of their host ; to them he talked freely, while Langley hailed with satisfaction anything that relieved him from Clarissa's overpowering attentions. Cigars were lit, John producing from a side table his own especial clay, and the five men grew jovial and friendly.

In vain Clarissa warbled her loudest songs ; in vain Mrs. Blu'ster sent to say coffee was ready. John ordered the coffee to be brought to the dining-room, but it never came, for his mother was mistress of the house. Lord

Blucastle might order, but Mrs. Blu'ster quickly counter-ordered, and she took care to see that her commands were obeyed. The cups remained in the drawing-room under her own eye; if the gentlemen wanted coffee let them come there for it, and so at last they did. Then, Clarissa, rising from the piano, herself presented Langley's cup, stood close to him while he drank it, and immediately asked for a song.

Langley hated singing to Clarissa, for it invariably involved listening to her performance afterwards—an absolute penance to Langley's musical nature; he tried the excuse of having no songs with him.

"Oh, but I know you brought a whole packet," Clarissa answered. "I went into your room after dinner to see if you had been made comfortable; your portmanteau was open, and I just turned over a few things, and there were the songs, at least a dozen."

Langley was speechless at this woman coolly admitting that she had been rummaging among his personal effects. Clarissa went on—

"So I picked them out, and here they are. You shall sing this first. I have been practising the accompaniment."

"Indeed!" the soldier answered: after this he was surprised at nothing.

Clarissa sat down and began to play; she stopped abruptly.

"Why don't you begin?" she asked impatiently.

"I thought perhaps you wished to sing my song as well as play it, Miss Blu'ster," Reginald replied, looking at her with an expression half amused, half contemptuous.

Clarissa's brow grew black as thunder at the sarcastic tone; but, recollecting herself quickly, she let her wrath exhale in thumping noisily on the unoffending keys; while Langley, never out of temper long, began to sing when she reached the second verse, and for the rest of the short time before John proposed "a smoke," Reginald sang and talked, and, as Mrs. Blu'ster said afterwards, devoted himself to Clarissa. In reality she persecuted him, and he bore the infliction patiently.

Joyfully he followed the other men to the now deserted kitchen. Lord Blucastle was not going, as he said, "to keep fires burning for nothing." The original smoking-room at Blucastle had been turned into a workshop, where he made his own gates and hurdles, and occasionally his cottagers' chairs and tables,



charging them so much for materials, which, coming out of his own woods, cost him nothing.

The guests at Blucastle always took their cigars and pipes in the kitchen, whither a footman brought a plentiful supply of gin, and a scanty one of brandy. Major Turbot proposed a rubber; John, seconding this, disappeared, and returned in a few minutes with a piece of green baize, clean, but worn and somewhat ragged about the corners; he threw this cover over a round tea table, pulled a few coppers out of his pocket, and the game began.

The stakes were small, and, luckily for the temper of the host, he and Major Turbot won. John did not relish losing even half a crown. In high good humour at his success, he dilated on his plans for the morrow; they would have a capital day. He knew for a fact that Sir Lionel Blessington, with a large party, meant to shoot an outlying set of coverts. Sir Lionel's woods were the best preserved in the county; the Blucastle party would have nothing to do but walk about in some adjacent fields, and they were certain to bag scores of Sir Lionel's pheasants. John considered this the primest fun, and was evidently proud of his 'cute management. This put the finishing stroke

to Langley's sojourn at Blucastle. He had stood Lord Blucastle's coarse manners, Clarissa's unwomanly love-making, and the niggardly fare ; but when he heard that he was actually expected to hang about a gentleman's coverts and shoot his game before his eyes, he instantly resolved nothing should keep him another day at Blucastle. Swallowing his disgust as best he could, he played out the rubber, then observed he was tired, wished "good night," and repaired to his own room. There he seized pen and paper, and hastily scrawled a note to Captain Downe :—

"DEAR DOWNE,

"I am in the most beastly fix a fellow can be in. The instant you get this, send a telegram ordering me to barracks on duty.

"Yours sincerely,

"REGINALD LANGLEY."

Luckily the village boasted an early post ; half a sovereign to the footman who brought the captain's hot water, secured this note being posted immediately. Downe received it before eleven, and close upon noon, as Lord Blucastle and his guests were trying a few fields for partridges, before taking up their

station near Sir Lionel's woods, a messenger rode up to them at full gallop from the nearest station.

The telegraphic message was delivered, and immediately shown to Lord Blucastle; then Langley, with a few polite regrets, shook hands with his host, declaring he could easily find his way back to the house; no one must spoil their sport for him.

John, loth to loose the chance of "doing" his neighbour, made no objection to this, and Captain Langley walked away alone, reached Blucastle village, ordered a dog-cart or any available trap from the inn, drove on to the Hall (his things he had packed before starting), and, walking unexpectedly into the drawing-room, found Mrs. Blu'ster and Clarissa quarrelling loudly. He caught the words—

"I tell you, Clarissa, that young man isn't such a fool as he looks;" and he was at no loss to imagine who the young man was, and that the ladies were discussing his own appearance and conduct.

Very disconcerted they looked, and Reginald, seizing the opportunity of their silence, explained that his presence was absolutely required in barracks, bade them adieu, and hastily quitted the room before Clarissa could

say a word, or Mrs. Blu'ster do more than express her surprise and sorrow, and her hope that he would come back soon.

"Never again will I set foot in this disgusting place," soliloquised Langley, as he drove away, glad at least that he had made his escape, and determining, for the twentieth time, that he would keep clear of the Blu'sters for the future. Reginald was always resolving this, and continually against his will Mrs. Blu'ster forced him to break the unspoken vow.

Langley stayed the rest of the week in Colchester. What was the use of going to Dinorlan! There was no one there except Alfred Grey; for the rest of the party, and Lady Geraldine, did not return from London till the day before the Wrinkleburgh ball.

## CHAPTER V.

## THE BLU'STER RESERVE FORCES.

"He turned about lightly, as the Gordons does a' ;  
'I thank you, Lady Jean, my love's promised awa.'"

*Scotch Ballad.*

THE Wrinkleburgh ball was not a success. Gertrude always spoke of it afterwards as the stupidest party she remembered ; Caroline declared there was hardly any one in the room fit to speak to ; and Geraldine told Lord Everingham the next morning that she did not care one bit about dancing now, and never wished to go to another ball ; while to Reginald Langley it was, without exception, the most aggravating evening he ever spent in his life. Nothing serious happened, nothing sensational, but the whole four hours seemed a series of misunderstandings and contretemps.

Langley's misfortunes began before he reached the ball-room. He dined at Dinorlan

that evening, and so did Lord Everingham and his daughter, though the latter only was to accompany the Greys to the ball. The master of the house, of course, took Lady Geraldine in to dinner; Langley, following with his cousin Gertrude, was just in time to see Alfred Grey, the only solitary one of the party, step quietly into a seat by Geraldine's side, while Langley was obliged to take a place on the other side of the table. He was further put out by hearing the earl's daughter almost immediately promising to dance the first dance with his cousin.

When the ball was first talked about, Langley had entreated for that very dance, and Geraldine had given a sort of half promise. Reginald meant to ask again after dinner; now he could have struck Grey for his coolness. He longed to proclaim that she had promised it to himself, but he felt it would only make him look ridiculous; and between Geraldine's laughing words, and Mrs. Blu'ster's hints, poor Reginald was perpetually haunted by the fear that his lady love made fun of him, and rather enjoyed seeing him make a fool of himself.

So now he bit his lips, then tried to smile pleasantly, and made some remark about the

floor of the ball-room, as if he quite liked her forgetting all about her promise to him. It was not very successfully done, and Geraldine's eyes gleamed mischievously; she guessed what suggested that disparagement of the Wrinkleburgh boards.

This was his first misfortune; then again, after dinner, he never had a chance of speaking to her for a moment unheard by others, and he was not sure that this might not be her doing. He began to torment himself into the belief that she was purposely avoiding him, though in reality it was the merest accident; for Geraldine in truth much preferred Reginald to Alfred Grey, and was, too, a wee bit disappointed that he had not claimed her half promise; she would have kept to it, had he asked her. She thought, perhaps, he wanted to dance with Clarissa Blu'ster, and, if so, he might do it and welcome.

Geraldine generally was not at all jealous; she had none of the little dislikes and spite that some girls cherish against other women; but Clarissa Blu'ster she did dislike; and she thought proudly, that if Captain Langley admired her, he could not like any one so different as herself.

Langley hardly spoke a word in answer to

Grey's conversation as the cousins walked the few hundred yards between Dinorlan and the Town-hall, whither Mr. Grey's carriage had previously conveyed himself, his daughters, and Lady Geraldine.

Wrinkleburgh knew nothing of the fashion of late arrivals; and Clarissa was chafing at the non-appearance of Captain Langley, while Mrs. Blu'ster and Jane were convinced that some cause or other had prevented the Greys coming at all, when they all marched into the room: Mr. Grey and Caroline, Captain Grey and Lady Geraldine, Langley and Gertrude.

A dance was just over. Captain Grey and Geraldine walked about, spoke to the few people they knew, and criticised the others, before the next valse began. Gertrude was immediately engaged by one of the Colchester officers; Caroline never danced; so it happened that Langley, left to his own resources, fell a victim to Mrs. Blu'ster.

With much warmth she welcomed the Hussar, linked her arm in his, and begged him to come with her to see the pretty decorations.

"Wrinkleburgh has surpassed itself," she said.

"It might easily do that," thought Lang-



ley, as he surveyed the rather dirty-looking flags borrowed from the coastguard station, and the somewhat tawdry ornaments that decked the walls.

In his mind the decorations were soon disposed of, but not so thought Mrs. Blu'ster. To be walking about on the arm of one of the Dinorlan party, was a triumph to her, and she made it as long as possible. The music struck up some minutes before she would return to her place, despite her companion's broad hints; much Mrs. Blu'ster cared for hints! Had he told her in plain words she was a nuisance to him, she would not one whit have relaxed her grasp of his arm. She stopped at last close to Clarissa, who immediately began a whole host of questions—

“When had Captain Langley come over?—where had he dined?—they wished so much he had dined with them. Who was that tall man with the insignificant-looking girl?”

Clarissa called all women under her own height and size insignificant. Then Mrs. Blu'ster asked if Captain Langley was fond of dancing; her dear Clarissa was devoted to it.

The hint was palpable enough, but Langley was determined not to be drawn into a flirta-

tion with Miss Clarissa; he had had too much of that already.

Nothing could be firmer than his determination that not one step would he dance with her, or indeed with any one save Lady Geraldine and Gertrude. He would just be civil to the Blu'sters and no more; and, remembering that Clarissa had more than once told him that her sister never danced, the Hussar thought to repay the Blu'ster civilities by asking Miss Blu'ster for a quadrille.

One word Mrs. Blu'ster whispered into Jane's ear, one movement of the huge green fan she carried outstretched, like a bandmaster's baton, and, to the soldier's intense surprise, Miss Blu'ster answered—

“With pleasure.”

For an instance, Langley's face was a picture of dismay. It was soon over; after all it did not matter, it was only Jane; he did not think even Gertrude objected so much to Jane, and surely Lady Geraldine could not be annoyed at an evidently duty dance with plain middle-aged Miss Blu'ster. So he wrote her name on his card, and departed to seek Geraldine Everley, intending to put her name down on the same card in as many places as she would graciously allow him; but Lady Geraldine

was not to be found, at least not to be spoken to, for Langley saw her conspicuously enough.

Wrinkleburgh young ladies, and ladies by no means young too, all danced in a style and with an energy that was startling to strangers; all the steps, the elegant turns, and elaborate bows that our ancestors practised some fifty years ago, and which have descended now to the kitchen departments, flourished still among the "upper ten" of Wrinkleburgh. Clarissa Blu'ster, Miss Hardress, nay, even Miss Canary, and old Mrs. Blu'ster *chasséed* and turned and were swung round with great gusto by their partners; while Clarissa hopped through a polka, and prided herself on the active way in which she performed a *schottische* and a *varsoviennne*. Angry looks and bitter remarks were directed at the strangers, who drew off from these performances.

"Do you see that absurd-looking Lady Geraldine?" observed Clarissa to Mr. Shirkwel, a brother of the vicar. Of course the Rev. Cyril was not present at the ball; such a thing would have destroyed, once for all, his reputation for piety among his admiring flock; but two of his brothers were allowed to be

there, and of course, as belonging to their vicar, the Blu'sters monopolised them entirely.

"I suppose she pretends to be tired, though she has hardly danced at all," went on Clarissa; "they gave out she was considered pretty in London—her beauty doesn't seem to make much impression here; no one asks her but those Colchester soldiers, who don't care whom they notice, and Captain Grey, whom she came with."

Clarissa sank the fact that Mr. Grey and his daughters came with her too; there was a vicious emphasis in her last words, as if her rival had been guilty of a terrible breach of decorum, if not a piece of absolute vice, in coming with the same party as Captain Grey. Then she said something about her "dear mamma," as if she, innocent lamb, could not stir a step in this wicked world, without maternal care.

Mr. Shirkwell, like many of his class, believed that most of the aristocracy were bad, or at least not as good as they might be. He had never before met an earl's daughter in society; the friendly hops among his business friends, and the occasional balls in the town in which he lived, were not graced by the aristocracy. So he liked to think a class so

far above him in position were beneath him in morals; besides, had he not been especially warned to beware of Lady Geraldine, by his sister-in-law, Juanita. He felt himself, too, unequal to dream of dancing with her; all the same, it was pleasant to affect to believe himself, and more pleasant still to make Miss Clarissa believe, that propriety, not shyness, kept him away from the prettiest girl in the room. So Mr. Shirkwell listened eagerly when Clarissa descanted on Lady Geraldine's extraordinary behaviour—

“She is not quite nice, you know; there are such strange reports about her; and don't you think there is generally some fire where there is so much smoke?”

Possibly, Clarissa, in some places; and wherever the Blu'sters reside there will be fire enough, and of a decidedly brimstone nature.

Meanwhile Reginald hovered about, watching Geraldine Everley, but not addressing her. If he had only gone boldly up, and asked her to dance with him, she would have assented gladly, but somehow poor Langley was beyond doing this; he could not speak to her like any one else; the consciousness of his own strong feelings made him sure that every one else saw them too.

Mrs. Blu'ster had said that Lady Geraldine laughed at him, and Reginald shrank horribly from her doing it now. It was the usual effect of Mrs. Blu'ster's insinuations; she had said nothing absolutely bad about the earl's daughter to Captain Langley, nothing that might not be true; but it did a great deal of mischief. Mrs. Blu'ster had noticed that Geraldine was apt to look grave after Langley had left Granite House, so she told the Hussar that she always looked particularly merry and amused, the exact opposite of the truth; for, in reality, the depth of Reginald's love a little frightened Geraldine; she herself liked him, but in such a moderate way that his passionate earnestness made her uncomfortable. She never could return it in the same way, even if there had not existed a Sir Ashton Piers. She always wished the Hussar would care less for her; in his presence she laughed and jested with him, on purpose to hide her consciousness of his uncomfortably strong feelings. When he was gone she always thought of him tenderly, almost sorrowfully, and wished him back again.

Mrs. Bluster's words had had the effect of making Langley for some time strangely constrained and awkward; and Geraldine,

knowing nothing of the cause, thought him tiresome and cross, and turned with relief to Alfred Grey, in whom certainly there was no depth of feeling to embarrass any one. Light as thistledown, floating hither and thither, were Grey's fancies; perhaps his liking for Lady Geraldine was the strongest he had ever felt, but that was principally because of its uncertainty. She did not care for him, and he felt it, and the strangeness of any woman not caring for the fascinating Guardsman piqued his vanity; for vainer than most women was selfish, pleasant-spoken Grey.

As Langley stood near the ball-room door, Geraldine and Alfred passed through;—she stopped.

"How serious you look, Captain Langley. Are you repenting your own sins, or finding out other people's?"

"He's down in the mouth because his friend, Miss Clarissa, has deserted him for the parson's brother," interrupted Grey, who was always glad to improve his own chance with Lady Geraldine by knocking down Langley's.

Alfred looked upon Reginald as his only serious rival. Though he had heard from Gertrude of Ashton Piers, he regarded the

latter as quite out of the running: first, he was so much older, then he was absent. Grey himself never remained in love with any one he did not see perpetually, so he accredited Geraldine with no more constancy than himself.

"I'm nothing of the sort, you idiot!" spoke Langley, so savagely that Geraldine looked amazed; the good-natured soldier was becoming quite a bear.

"It was only a joke," she interposed quickly.

"It hit the mark; see the result," observed Grey mischievously.

And Langley, for the hundredth time, felt he had made a fool of himself; he felt it still more when Lady Geraldine whispered—

"Take my advice, and smooth your ruffled feelings by dancing with Miss Clarissa;" and then she passed on before he could answer one word.

"I'll not stand this any longer," he muttered, looking after the retreating figures. "There's my fool of a cousin putting it into her head that I actually like Clarissa Blu'ster—the idea of such absurdity! But Lady Geraldine's so beautiful herself, she's no notion that every other woman looks a



hag beside her. I see I shan't have a chance of saying a word to-night, so it's no good trying. I don't care what happens; to-morrow I'll ask her point-blank to have me. I'll make an opportunity. I'll come over early and speak to her."

Thus determining, Langley felt his spirits rise. He shook himself together, looked round the room, and espied Jane Bluster, evidently expecting him. He thought—

"I may as well get that over now. Geraldine is safe to stay ever so long in the tea-room. Alfred, horrid brute, will take care of that; and if she does come back before the tiresome quadrille is over, why, it's only Jane—it can't matter."

He walked across to Miss Blu'ster.

"Will you mind dancing with my sister instead of me, Captain Langley? I'm rather tired," said Miss Blu'ster, coolly.

What was he to do? He could not plead an engagement; as a gentleman he could not refuse point-blank. Nor had Clarissa done anything to deserve such rudeness. It was provoking, but it could not be helped. He held out his arm with a silent bow; Clarissa clutched it in triumph, and they took their places in a quadrille.

The lady did all the talking, for Langley was in no amusing vein ; he listened, but his thoughts were busy over what he should say to-morrow, and what he hoped Geraldine would answer, and he was only conscious that Clarissa's shrill voice went sounding on and on.

Presently back came Alfred Grey and Lady Geraldine. The colour rose in Langley's face, and his brows knit, as he marked the momentary surprise that came into Geraldine's eyes at the sight of his partner ; she hardly thought he would have acted on her words, and yet he had. Geraldine drew her hand abruptly from Grey's arm, and sat down by Caroline.

"What a stupid, tiresome ball this is, Carrie !" she said, and Langley's ear caught the weary tones.

He had hated the whole evening himself, because he fancied she avoided him. If it had been wearisome to her, could it be because he had not been with her ? Reginald's nature was as quickly pleased as easily depressed ; he grew quite radiant in the belief that his love missed him. He looked across at her with undisguised pleasure, and she, naturally thinking the pleasure was caused by Clarissa, felt disgusted and angry.

Geraldine could not quite make up her mind to marry Reginald; nevertheless, she hated to think that he had given her up. She wanted to remain as she was, and only love Ashton Piers; but if she must marry some one else, and Lord Everingham was perpetually reiterating this, well then, she would rather choose Reginald than any other. It was provoking to think that perhaps now he preferred another, and such another as Clarissa Blu'ster.

Langley, keenly alive to every expression of the woman he loved, felt, more than saw, a sort of stiffness come into the graceful figure, and the slightest compression of the rosy lips. Her eyes glanced once at Clarissa, surveying her from head to foot. Next, she looked for an instant steadily at him, with a sort of cold contempt, that stung him like an actual blow. Then Geraldine turned to Alfred, and never glanced again in Langley's direction, not even when the dance was over; and, Clarissa expressing a wish for an ice, the two left the room together. Langley turned at the door, and shot one quick glance at Geraldine, but she was listening, apparently with great interest, to Alfred Grey's compliments, and never raised her eyes from the

bouquet that her cavalier had taken possession of and was twisting carelessly in his fingers.

Langley's silent coldness made no difference to Clarissa. It was no part of her husband-hunting schemes to make the desired suitors like her. She worked upon a different feeling, as we shall see before long. With her the important thing was to keep Langley by her side in public; to make him appear attentive; whether his attentions were willingly given or not, mattered nothing.

She sipped an ice, dawdling over it till another dance was begun, despite Langley's visible impatience. He could not tell her to eat quicker, though he looked intensely disgusted when she said—

“The last ice was so good, I really must have another.”

When, at last, she did consent to take his arm and be led back to her mother, no Mrs. Blu'ster was to be found—she had disappeared from the ball-room; and even Jane, too, was missing. Langley handed his companion to a sofa, and made his farewell bow, when she said in a delightfully innocent way—

“Please will you stay with me till mamma comes? I don't like to be all alone among so many.”

"But I thought you knew everybody in Wrinkleburgh. These must be your own friends," suggested Langley, unable to see any motive for her absurdity.

"Mamma will be back directly, I feel sure," she answered, drawing her dress away to make room for him.

Put in this way, he could not but comply. It would be absurd to say, "I won't stay with you," and nothing else would be of any avail. Chafing and annoyed, he sat down, turning half away, and resolutely answered nothing but "yes" or "no" to her questions and remarks. If positively forced to stay there, all the world—especially Lady Geraldine, sitting opposite—should see he felt it was a bore.

Minutes passed, and Mrs. Blu'ster did not appear. The music ceased. The dancers dispersed in all directions. Still Clarissa sat there. Then Langley offered to go himself and find Mrs. Blu'ster. Clarissa rose quickly.

"I will go too," she said. And again the soldier had no alternative. They walked away together; through two passages, and into the tea-room they went—still no Mrs. Bluster. Clarissa suggested having some supper; the others were going there. Once seated at the

long table, she dawdled over her refreshment, till Langley could have stamped at her.

"Mamma must have gone back," she said at length, as the music recommenced. Langley was willing enough to go. So the two, still together, re-entered the dancing-room.

"Oh, what a delicious valse!" exclaimed Clarissa. "Do just take one turn with me, Captain Langley."

"Ah! really you must excuse me. I'm not good at valseing," stammered Langley, too put out to think of a rational answer.

"You are not engaged, I know; and you dance beautifully. Take just one turn," she answered, drawing her hand from his arm, and deliberately putting it on his shoulder.

To refuse now would be a rudeness before the whole room, and Langley, savage as he felt, was incapable of doing this to any woman. Again he had no alternative but to comply. For once Clarissa spoke the truth when she gasped out her pleasure—for Langley's easy swing and perfect guiding made a wonderful contrast to Clarissa's usual partners, with their awkward steps, and the bumps and jerks incidental to Wrinkleburgh dancing—while he thought—

"What can possess her to persecute me like

this ? When I came here to-night, I thought she was a handsome, pleasant sort of woman. Now, I hate her like poison. She's like Sinbad's Old Man of the Sea."

Clarissa was soon out of breath. Panting and puffing, she was carried bodily along the last few yards.

"The pace is too strong for you," was the only ill-natured remark in which Langley indulged himself, as he looked at her flushed face and disordered hair. Clarissa was one of those women who come to pieces while dancing. Her plaits looked untidy and rough, without actually falling down ; her face uncomfortably suggested an apoplectic fit, and had a sort of greasy look, anything but becoming.

"A Derby pace does for a half-bred one," Langley muttered to himself ; thinking how Geraldine Everley's light figure would float along, her low voice speaking all the time, with never a pause to take breath. He glanced in the direction where he saw her last, but she was gone, and Caroline was not in the seat she had occupied most of the evening ; neither was Mr. Grey to be seen anywhere. Could they have gone home ?

Langley, impatient to know what had be-

come of them, hurried Clarissa into the passage, saying something about "a nice cool place." There he stopped, looking around with Clarissa still on his arm. Mr. Grey was standing near the door, apparently waiting for the rest, and at that moment Alfred, with a shawl over his arm, passed close.

Langley, stepping forward, touched his arm.

"I say, where are the others?"

"What others?—the other Blu'sters? You ought to know better than I do. Gerty says you're mad to-night, and both the girls declare they'll never have anything to do with cousin Clarissa Langley."

"It's you that are mad," exclaimed Langley, "to think of such a thing!"

"Think of it! why, everybody is talking of it. What can you expect after the way you've gone on for days, and to-night for a climax? If you don't mean anything, you're a scamp; and if you do, you're——" Here Grey bent his head and whispered—"a fool;" then laughed and turned.

Alfred spoke as if in joke, but there was some malice mixed with the fun, for as Langley turned also, close behind him stood Geraldine Everley, and, almost touching her shoulder, Jane Blu'ster.



"Could they have heard? Surely Geraldine did not notice Alfred's words," thought Langley, unheeding the other, while Grey muttered—

"Confound it! I hope that Miss Blu'ster didn't catch my remark about her sister."

Here Caroline came up.

"We are just going; good-night, Reginald," she said.

Geraldine did not speak as she held out her hand.

"Let me take you to the carriage," whispered Langley, drawing her hand within his arm.

"Attend to your own partner, my friend, and leave mine alone," said Grey, still laughing.

"Lady Geraldine, are you ready?" interrupted Mr. Grey, and he settled the question by walking off with the earl's daughter himself.

Langley looked disconcerted, and seized the opportunity to explain matters.

"I say, Carrie, will you tell Gertrude I've made an awful mess of to-night. I've been regularly pestered by those Blu'sters. I hate every one of them. I shall come over before four to-morrow. Ask Gerty if we can't go over to Cove Castle, as she proposed; I wish it

particularly; tell her so, and she'll know what I mean."

"It's more than I do," Caroline answered; "but I'll give your message, Reginald, and we'll look out for you. Good-night."

Langley put her into the carriage, handed in Gertrude, and whispered to the latter—

"Carrie will tell you about my ill-luck;" then, linking his arm in Captain Downe's, who had come up with Gertrude, he found his cap and cloak, and, without returning to the ball-room, repaired to the Blue Lion, whence he and the rest of the Colchester men were to return by an early train to barracks.

"I'll try my fate this very day," he said almost aloud, as he mounted the steps of the hotel.

Not so, Captain Langley; you have not done with Clarissa Blu'ster yet.

Three o'clock the next day saw Reginald Langley walking up Fort Hill. As he turned towards Granite House, Mrs. Morris came quickly out of Herring Villa and accosted him; so suddenly she came, it seemed as if she must have watched for his arrival.

"I wish to speak to you, Captain Langley," she exclaimed breathlessly.

"At your service," he replied, lifting his hat.

"Come into my house," she said, pointing across Fort Hill.

"I am sorry, but indeed I am in a hurry. Can you not tell me here if I can do anything for you?"

"I must speak to you—I must," she replied vehemently, her little red face working with excitement, and her eyes rolling till he thought she would have a fit.

She seemed strung up to do something she much disliked or dreaded; and Langley, who had only met her twice before—at Mrs. Bluster's luncheon, and once when she had called on Lady Geraldine while he was at Granite House—thought something dreadful had happened. He did not know how easily the silly little woman could be persuaded to undertake anything, however preposterous. This morning she seemed so excited, and talked so oddly to such a comparative stranger, that he began to think her not sane, and grew still more surprised when she went on, jerking out her words in short abrupt sentences—

"I know where you are going. I can guess your purpose. I don't at all wonder, I'm sure. The young lady is so handsome. Most people

admire her, and I'm sure you mean everything right and proper. Ah! you look surprised that I know anything about it; but she told me herself, and I can tell you, in confidence, I know she likes you. Yes, I do indeed! I dare say you have never heard of me, though I met you once at her house, and of course I saw how it was then, and I talked to her about you. Ah! you thought I hardly knew her, but I love her quite like a child of my own. Poor dear, she wants a little care; her sole guardian isn't everything to be desired. Ah! yes, you think with me, I see; one may love the daughter and yet see the parent's faults. That makes me speak to you now. I am sure you will not mind, and will take it to be only my interest and affection for her you love; at least I think you do from what I saw. Is it not so?" And Mrs. Morris looked keenly in Langley's face.

While she was hurrying this out, the two were walking across the grass. She stood now with her foot on her own doorstep, and waited for his answer.

It never occurred to Langley that she meant any other than Lady Geraldine—the words applied exactly to her; the earl was rather a black sheep, and perhaps she did want

guiding, though Langley could not see she wanted anything. He was surprised at Mrs. Morris's interest, as he had never heard her name mentioned at Granite House. Still, the slightest thing that concerned Geraldine Everley was to him so intensely interesting, that if she wanted to speak to him of her, he would listen till doomsday. For, had she not said she liked him? And that was quite enough to make the soldier believe Mrs. Morris's foolish incoherent words charming. He replied boldly, his face flushing with pleasure at the avowal—

“It is no secret, Mrs. Morris, I do love her. I would give my life for her just this minute. Anything you say, I shall be glad to hear.”

And he followed his companion upstairs into her drawing-room, and sat down with her on a sofa, thinking what a friendly nice little woman his hostess was. Interest in Geraldine Everley was the surest passport to Langley's regard, and though he could not see what Mrs. Morris had to do with his love, he was quite willing she should talk about its object. Mrs. Morris went on looking very satisfied, and speaking much more quietly—

“I am glad to hear you speak so honestly

and openly. You want to marry her, of course?"

"Of course I do—who wouldn't?—if she'll only take me; and you think she will, don't you, Mrs. Morris?"

"Yes, I do. I may say I know she will."

"It's a comfort to hear you say so, for I've been awfully afraid she should say 'no' for the last six months."

"Six months!" interrupted Mrs. Morris excitedly. "How could you know her before you came to Wrinkleburgh?"

"I met her at a ball, and fell in love with her the first time I saw her."

"Yes, yes; so she told me."

Langley started. He had not thought Geraldine was conscious of his admiration that night at Ryde.

Mrs. Morris went on:

"I thought it was in Wrinkleburgh you met?"

"It was here I first saw her father."

"Her father!—why he's dead!"

"Good gracious! you don't say so! How awfully sudden! And I saw him quite well last night."

Langley looked shocked at the terrible sorrow that had come upon Geraldine. This

then, was what Mrs. Morris had to tell. It was kindly meant to warn him and spare Geraldine. His poor little love, she was alone in the world now—that should not be much longer. How he wanted to go that instant, and tell her he would take care of her. She was dearer to him than ever. I don't think Langley thought much of the earl's sad end; he was too absorbed in thinking of his daughter. He never noticed Mrs. Morris's look of astonishment, and the sort of curiosity, mixed with a strange awe, that came into her face.

“Did you really see him last night? How wonderful! I've heard of such things. Perhaps his spirit was hovering round his daughter! Tell me, what did he look like—a ghost?”

“Not a bit!—he looked as well as I ever saw him in my life. Poor fellow! It must have been awfully sudden.”

“How did he come? Was he long with you? Did he disappear suddenly, or fade away?”

“Disappear!—fade away! Of course not. No one had any idea there was anything the matter with him, or we should not have gone to the ball.”

"Did you see him before the ball?" Mrs. Morris's eyes opened very wide.

"Yes; why I dined with him at my uncle's."

"You dined with a spirit! How extraordinary! And did he eat?"

"Eat!—why of course he ate; and as for being a spirit, I tell you he looked as well as ever. Is Lady Geraldine very much distressed?" This was what Langley wanted to know.

"Lady Geraldine! I don't suppose she has heard anything about it, unless you told her. What has she to do with it?"

Langley stared at his companion in blank amazement; she must be out of her mind to ask what Geraldine had to do with her own father's death.

"Why! What!" he stammered. "Didn't you tell me just now Lord Everingham was dead."

"Lord Everingham!—not that I know of; but I should never be surprised at anything happening to such a wicked creature; and his daughter, I fear, isn't much better. I saw them both not ten minutes before I met you: never mind them, but tell me, does Clarissa know you saw her father last night?"



Langley started to his feet. What did it all mean?—there must be some mistake.

“Mrs. Morris,” he said, standing before his companion, and trying to speak quietly; “will you explain what you mean?—first, I understood you to say Lord Everingham was dead; now you say he is alive—which is true?”

“I never said one word about Lord Everingham. Didn’t you tell me you saw Captain Blu’ster’s ghost last night?”

“Captain Blu’ster! I never knew there was such a person.”

“Never knew there was such a person as the father of the girl you want to marry!” almost screamed Mrs. Morris, rising in her excitement and clutching the sleeve of his coat; “and didn’t you tell me you loved Clarissa Blu’ster, and would lay down your life for her?”

Clarissa Blu’ster! Here was a mistake indeed. The very extremity of the situation brought back the soldier’s coolness; for one instant, hardly more, he was silent. Recalling rapidly what his companion had said, he saw now she must have meant that he loved Clarissa Blu’ster; and the notion, absurd as it was, was probably founded on Clarissa’s ridiculous conduct last night.

"Mrs. Morris," Langley said gravely, "I am sorry to have misunderstood you, as you appear to have mistaken me. I believed when you spoke of my admiration for a young lady, that you meant Lady Geraldine Everley, to whom I have been attached ever since I first saw her, six months ago. I need not say, my words applied only to her. I have the pleasure of knowing Mrs. Blu'ster and her daughters very slightly, and I believe they would be as much surprised as I am at your allusion to anything between Miss Clarissa and myself."

"They are nothing of the sort. Mrs. Blu'ster told me to speak to you," exclaimed Mrs. Morris, too astonished to pick her words, or to see what she was betraying.

She had been prepared by clever Mrs. Blu'ster for opposition, and told exactly what to say, but everything having gone, as she thought, so well at first, the instructions about "caution," and "feeling her way," had gone clean out of her head—a head that never contained much besides the last idea put into it; so now she showed the whole plan distinctly. She declared that Captain Langley had made his attentions to Clarissa so public that every one was talking about them. He

had won Clarissa's heart, and surely he did not mean to break it, by giving her up now.

Langley was provoked, besides being half inclined to laugh at the notion of Clarissa's heart. He saw now what a deliberate plan the whole Blu'ster family had gone upon; but, angry as he felt, Langley was still too good a fellow to say plainly to Mrs. Morris that her friend, Miss Clarissa, was a scheming woman, who had laid a trap into which he was resolved nothing should drive him.

He tried to gloss the whole thing over, and spare, in words at least, the Blu'sters' name. He said he was sorry, but really he had never said one word to make Miss Blu'ster believe he liked her; such an idea never entered his thoughts. She and all the world might have seen he was attached elsewhere, and he hoped Mrs. Morris would be a true friend, both to Miss Blu'ster and himself, by explaining this as kindly as she could; and express his sorrow that they had misunderstood him, and say he hoped they would regard him as a friend. He should be happy at any time to do anything to oblige them.

This was decidedly, but considerately spoken. Mrs. Morris ought to have accepted the explanation; but she had received orders to push

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the affair to the last extremity. She had, under great pressure from Mrs. Blu'ster, promised to threaten the soldier with the direst consequences, and she exclaimed vehemently—

“You are trying to behave disgracefully; I will write to your commanding officer; I will lay the case before the Queen! Officers are all bad and immoral and unchristian, and you are the worst!”

Reginald laughed somewhat scornfully, and took up his hat; but Mrs. Morris flew to the door, and, standing before it, declared she had not said half what she meant to say—he must wait.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Morris, I cannot stay; it is already long past the time I am expected elsewhere; and this conversation cannot be pleasant either to yourself or me.”

“I must appeal to you once more, to do as every gentleman is bound to do,” Mrs. Morris said, pouring out her words without a pause, as if repeating a lesson. “You have made Clarissa Blu'ster conspicuous, you have walked about with her alone, you devoted yourself to her all last night. Do you mean, Captain Langley, to tell me, her friend, her protector I may say, that you don't mean to marry her?”

"Mrs. Morris, I have never spoken one word, or done a single thing, to warrant any of Miss Blu'ster's friends speaking to me like this."

"You have flirted with her publicly?"

"I deny it."

"Can you deny your conduct last night? Can you even declare that it was not the subject of your own relations' observation, and that one at least of them did not speak to you about it?"

Instantly it darted into Langley's mind that Jane Blu'ster must have heard Alfred's joke, and thus it was used.

Mrs. Morris saw the confusion in his face, and went on—

"Your own friends remarked your conduct, as well as Clarissa's; you cannot deny they did. I ask you again, did not one speak to you about it?"

"Only my cousin, Captain Grey, made a joking remark, and whoever overheard him must have heard, too, that he was only laughing at an absurd notion."

"I'm sure you can't think it fun to break a young girl's heart, Captain Langley."

The absurdity of talking of Clarissa as a young girl, of calling her heart broken, almost

overcame Langley's annoyance at being so taken to task. With an effort he strangled a laugh, and Mrs. Morris never even perceived his amusement; she rambled on, one moment praising Clarissa's warm feelings and devoted affection, the next, dwelling on the advantage of being connected with such a high family as the Blu'sters. A great deal of nonsense she talked, mingling Lord Blucastle's rank and Jane's piety with Mrs. Blu'ster's scheming talents and Clarissa's beauty, till any one might conclude she expected her hearer to marry every one of them.

At last she wound up with a distinct avowal that he was bound in honour to marry Clarissa Blu'ster. Then Langley, out of patience, provoked, and annoyed, and seeing Mrs. Morris laid so much stress on his being bound to Clarissa, thought to end the matter by saying quickly—

"I am bound in honour, as you say, to marry, not Clarissa Blu'ster, but Lady Geraldine Everley. Long before I ever saw Miss Blu'ster, I asked Lady Geraldine to marry me; she would not give a decided answer then, and I am still waiting; but, rest assured of one thing, Mrs. Morris, no other woman will ever be my wife."

"Then this is your answer, that you are engaged to another."

"No! understand me, please," exclaimed Reginald; "I am not engaged, because Lady Geraldine has never said she would have me, but I have asked her."

"Is that all?—then every one will say you are bound to marry Clarissa, after the way you have gone on."

Mrs. Morris had learned her lesson well, and repeated it continually. Langley lost all patience.

"Bound by fiddlesticks!" he exclaimed. "I cannot think how any one can talk such nonsense. Miss Blu'ster cannot mean what you are saying. If you talk of being bound to any one, I am bound to Lady Geraldine by my own words, and it's a bond not all the old women in England shall make me break; not that I need any binding to her; she would scorn the notion of such a thing; she wants no friends to talk at a fellow."

"If this is your reason why you cannot marry Clarissa Blu'ster, I can say no more," observed Mrs. Morris, mindful of Clarissa's injunction to make him say whether he meant to marry Lady Geraldine or not.

For Clarissa had done this same trick too

often before not to know that it was as likely, aye, ten times more likely, to end in failure than success. So she prepared to revenge a defeat; if she could not marry Captain Langley herself, she would stop her rival doing so; and she so sedulously impressed her ambassador with the desirability of getting him in some way to acknowledge that he did not care for Lady Geraldine, that Mrs. Morris regarded obtaining this to be almost as important as what he felt for Clarissa herself.

Anything that would end this unpleasant interview was so welcome to Langley, that in his relief at Mrs. Morris saying she would say no more, he forgot the first part of her sentence; it was only afterwards that he had cause to remember what she had said, and what his silence had allowed to pass uncontradicted.

Reginald, honest and true to his love, was no match for the Blu'sters. His manly good heart prevented him telling Mrs. Morris plainly that Clarissa was a designing woman; instinctively he shielded her from blame, even at the moment that she was executing her plan; and she and her mother repaid his forbearance by plotting to destroy the one hope of his life. Truly there may be worse-acting



women in this world of ours ; it is doubtful whether there are worse-hearted ones than these two.

Langley rose quickly, saying—

“ Good morning, Mrs. Morris, I am sorry if I have said anything to annoy you or Miss Blu’ster, but you must remember it is rather difficult for a fellow to know what to say ; the whole thing took me by surprise.”

Good-naturedly he thought to smooth everything over, but his last words gave Mrs. Morris an excuse for saying afterwards, that Captain Langley expressed himself repentant for his disgraceful conduct, and seemed very much ashamed of himself.

With no shame, but a sensation of relief, and a strong feeling of the vast difference there is between one woman and another, Langley re-crossed Fort Hill. The Granite House gates stood wide open ; he looked at his watch. Could it be really half-past four o’clock, and he had told Caroline he would be there before four. He turned up the gravel path and rang the bell. Lady Geraldine was not at home, and the earl had gone to London that morning. Did Jules know where Lady Geraldine had gone ? No, he did not ; but Miss Grey had called for her in the

carriage, and she was not expected back till the evening. Was Mrs. Studley at home? No, she had gone down to the beach; but she would be back in a short time.

Langley went off to Dinorlan; no one was at home there either. The butler said Mr. Grey had gone to town with the earl, and the ladies and Captain Alfred had driven out. Where? The butler was not sure; at breakfast Miss Gertrude had said they would go to Cove Castle, but he had reason to believe the place was altered at the last moment, and he did not know to where.

There was nothing to be done. Langley, dreading being captured by the Blu'sters, would not stir out of Dinorlan. He roamed about the garden smoking, and cursing Mrs. Blu'ster, and the drive, and everything and everybody except Lady Geraldine. What would she think of him? Gertrude, too, must be very angry, to go off like this, leaving neither message nor note.

Presently it occurred to him to write to his cousin and explain. He sat down and wrote, first one explanation, and then another. He could not tell the subject of his interview with Mrs. Morris, yet it was more than possible that he had been seen by some of his cousins,

either walking with her, or going to her house. He wrote, and tore up, and re-wrote, till, as his dog-cart came round, he hurriedly penned a few lines, telling Gertrude he had come over, but, being unavoidably detained, he had arrived too late to join the party to Cove Castle. He would be sure to come again the day after to-morrow. To-morrow was a field-day, and Langley was too good a soldier to dream of shirking regimental duty.

His note written, he drove round by Granite House; rushed in for a few words with Mrs. Studley, assuring that good lady, with unnecessary vehemence, how disappointed he was not to have seen his cousins; of Geraldine he did not speak, till, shaking the old lady's hand on adieu, he contrived to say—

“Will you tell Lady Geraldine I could not help being late.” He hesitated, then added, “I hope I shall see her when I come on Saturday.”

He looked anxiously at Mrs. Studley's face, to judge whether she would repeat this to her pupil, and was disappointed at the indifferent answer—

“I am sure Lord Everingham and Geraldine are always glad to see you.”

It was not the words, they were pleasant

enough ; but the governess spoke so evidently as a matter of politeness—the speech she would have addressed to each and every visitor.

Langley went away with nothing more than “good-bye.” Do what he would, there seemed a sort of fate against his love, and good-natured, hopeful Langley was getting low-spirited and nervous ; was getting to believe there was presentiment in his doubts, and that all his efforts would be useless. He felt this still more, when, walking into the mess-room, he was greeted with—

“Hallo ! Langley, here’s luck for you ; old Thurlow’s father is ill, and he’s gone off suddenly to see him. Seaton is on leave, so you’ll have to do Major.”

“Luck ! confounded ill luck I call it, just when I wanted leave,” was the unexpected rejoinder.

“Want will be your master, my dear fellow, for not a day’s leave have you a chance of till next month ; you know what the Colonel is. It’s providential that our ball comes off in a fortnight, so you’ll have a chance of seeing your fair friends here. You needn’t look so sly about it ; last night told us. It isn’t for your male cousins you go so much to Wrinkleburgh, eh !” and Downe laughed heartily.

Then the talk reverted to regimental affairs, and Langley alone knew how unfortunate his detention at Colchester might be.

Gertrude Grey's eyes flashed sarcastically as she read the note left at Dinorlan.

"Unavoidably detained, indeed!" she exclaimed; "didn't I see him myself walking with the Blusters' great friend, Mrs. Morris? I can't think what Reginald is after, he is so queer just now; to make such a point of the drive to Cove Castle, and then be late—it's abominable."

"I don't think so at all. I really don't see that it matters; one man more or less makes very little difference. We had a capital day," observed Geraldine vehemently.

It did not deceive her friend, though; she guessed at once that the younger girl was sorely displeased and mortified. Truly Geraldine could not understand her once so faithful lover. He who used to be so gentle, so pleasant, so devoted, who bore all her freaks and humoured every fancy, was now irritable and inconstant, one day making such a fuss about coming over, the next actually neglecting her for Clarissa Blu'ster. The provoking part of it all was, that now, when he seemed to waver, she liked him far better than she used to do.

It was human nature, disregarding the absolute possession, setting double value on what was perhaps slipping away.

Gertrude was by far the most angry of the two; for Geraldine was more disappointed and inclined to blame herself than angry with Reginald; whereas Gertrude had no patience with her cousin. Had he not told her before she came to Wrinkleburgh how he loved Lady Geraldine? and had not she, Gertrude, taken the earl's daughter to her heart directly, for the sake of this favourite cousin? Besides, was he not constantly now asking her to help him? And yet, why did he go on so with that vulgar Clarissa Blu'ster?

Gertrude longed to give Reginald a shake, and tell him she would never excuse him any more. Nevertheless, she began now to make the best of his absence, declaring she was certain he could not help it; Mrs. Morris was an interminable talker; it was difficult to get away from her; Reggie was always careless about time; he said he was "much disappointed," and she was sure he felt so; and she glanced with a smile at Geraldine.

The latter smiled back, though she answered, she, at least, was not "disappointed." She could exist very well without Captain Langley.

Upon which Gertrude kissed her, and told her not to tell stories, and they passed to other topics; but, I believe, of the two, Geraldine was the most grieved when, two days after, the post brought to Gertrude another letter from Langley detailing the extra duty that had fallen to his lot, and adding that he could not manage to come over again before the Huzzar ball, ending with—

“Dear Gerty, pray explain this to all at Wrinkleburgh, and say, I’d move heaven and earth to come, but it’s no use.”

“All at Wrinkleburgh!” soliloquized Gertrude. “Does that mean Geraldine Everley or Miss Bluster? I hope not the latter; at any rate I’ll take care not to explain anything to those ‘Villa’ people.”

## CHAPTER VI.

ROSA.

"The best-laid schemes o' mice and men  
Gang aft agley."

BURNS.

BEFORE Langley met his love again, one at least of his rivals was put *hors de combat*. Alfred Grey left Wrinkleburgh anything but pleased with Lady Geraldine. A few words spoken in the Dinorlan garden changed all his views, and showed him plainly the hopelessness of his suit.

"Lady Geraldine," began Grey, walking out of earshot of his sisters, "do you know, Grantham wants me to go and shoot with him next week?"

"No, I did not; but is that such a wonderful piece of intelligence that I ought to have heard it before?" she asked rather satirically.



"No! of course not, only I'm not sure whether I shall go. Should you, if you were me?"

"As I'm not you, I couldn't possibly say what I should do if I was," she answered, bent on being provoking.

"But I mean, shall I go or not? You decide for me."

"How can I decide upon a thing that doesn't matter to me one way or another?"

"Doesn't it?" he said, as bitterly as light-natured Alfred Grey could speak; "then I've been a fool, that's all."

"For asking my advice? Thank you, Captain Grey. How cross you are! If you will be good-tempered again, perhaps I might give you my solemn judgment; if you want to go, go; and if you don't, why don't—there!"

"Then I shall go to-morrow," he said sulkily.

"Didn't I say you would go? Now, suppose we go back to your sisters, who must have talked their say to that old woman long ago." And not another word did Geraldine speak to Grey that day, and he started for Yorkshire the next, without more than a formal adieu to the inmates of Granite House.

Two days after Alfred's arrival at Grantham,

an unusual bustle pervaded the small railway platform at Boxworth. It was seldom so many passengers required first-class tickets as on the morning when Mr. Grey, his two daughters, with the Earl and Lady Geraldine, started from Wrinkleburgh, bound for Colchester, to attend a ball given by the 51st Hussars.

As the train drew up at Colchester, Captain Langley came to the carriage door.

"Welcome to Colchester!" he said, addressing the whole party, but looking at Geraldine as if his greeting was only meant for her. "What do you say to sending the boxes and maids in a cab to the hotel, and taking a turn round the place yourselves. A nice afternoon for a walk," he added, looking at the dull grey sky and lowering clouds of the November afternoon, as if they were June sunshine.

"It will rain in five minutes," observed Caroline; but Geraldine, looking eager for the walk, Gertrude proposed that her sister and the earl should drive while the rest walked. She silenced her father's objection by whispering—

"Do let Reggie have the chance he's dying to have; you come with me."

Mr. Grey was too good-natured to refuse;

and he and his daughter followed Langley and Geraldine up the steep hill that leads from the station into the town. The Hussar was in high spirits, laughing and talking, pointing out the beauties of the place, and expatiating upon the arrangements for the coming ball. Very pleasant did he make himself during the walk, and he shared the ladies' afternoon tea, and eagerly accepted his uncle's invitation to give up the mess and dine with them; and only left their hotel in time to rush back to barracks and put on his uniform, before he met again the Wrinkeburgh party at the ball-room door.

There Colonel St. John greeted them, and Gertrude was proudly happy, looking at the man she had loved through good report and ill, through absence and apparent neglect; and won at last.

He was a fine-looking man. Even Caroline admitted that. To her sister, he was everything a hero should be. He was certainly devoted enough that night, proud of his promised bride, and anxious to show her to his officers.

All this was very pleasant, and Gertrude enjoyed herself extremely. But to Reginald Langley this much-anticipated evening turned

to very dust and ashes ; for Geraldine, after dancing the first dance with him, resolutely refused to give him another. She danced incessantly herself, and was universally pronounced the belle of the ball. Very lovely she looked, as, radiant with pleasure, she laughed and flirted, always followed by a knot of admirers, while Langley never obtained more than a few passing words.

How wildly jealous he felt, as he saw her, for the fourth time that night, whirling round on the arm of Major Webb, of the Artillery ! Whatever befell, he would put a stop to that. She should listen to him, he would learn his fate that evening. With angry eyes he watched the pair till they paused for breath, then Langley stepped forward.

"Lady Geraldine, my cousin Gertrude is looking everywhere for you. Will you allow me to take you to her ?"

"Where is she ? Surely it is not time to go. This is such a capital ball—I don't want to leave yet," was the answer ; the latter part addressed to Major Webb.

"Is Miss What's-her-name your *chaperone*," the gunner said. "Show me where the old lady is, and I will go and tell her she can't be such a barbarian as to deprive us of the beauty of the evening."

“Major Webb, allow me to observe that I don’t like bare-faced compliments. They mean that the speaker is either very silly himself, or he thinks his partner a goose who will believe any nonsense—isn’t it so, Captain Langley? You certainly haven’t troubled me with civil speeches to-night, but have done nothing but look as cross as—what shall I say?—as Trounce does whenever he sees his enemy, Witney. Now, if Gertrude really wants me, suppose we go.”

Both men offered their arms. Geraldine stood a moment, laughing and looking from one to the other.

“How I wish I had a penny! heads, I go with Major Webb; tails, with Captain Langley. Alas! that I should have to decide the momentous question unassisted. It shall be tails, because I suspect it is a tale of your invention that Gertrude wants me; there! Captain Langley;” and she put her hand on the Hussar’s arm.

Now Langley, of course, knew every inch of the Colchester barracks. He led his companion down a long passage, and, opening a door, ushered her into a room, dark, save for the light that streamed through the open door, from a jet of gas in the corridor.

Langley struck a match, and lighted a pair of candles on the chimney-piece, and was proceeding to shut the door, when Geraldine exclaimed—

“What are you going through such a pantomime for?”

She began to be half frightened at his behaviour. There was nothing to alarm any one, of course, she felt, for were not a hundred people quite close? She could hear the music, and buzz of voices in the ball-room, yet she felt lonely; besides, Captain Langley looked so odd, so different to his usual self.

“Whose room is this?” she asked, moving as if to look at some pictures on the walls, but laying her hand on the handle of the door, to prevent his closing it.

“It’s my sitting-room. I want to speak to you, away from those fellows you have done nothing but talk to all the evening.”

She laughed. “What do you suppose people go to balls for, except to talk to ‘fellows,’ as you say? Now I am going back.”

“I must speak to you first; you shall hear me!” he exclaimed, standing before the door.

“Not now!” Geraldine drew her small figure up proudly. “I don’t choose to hear anything more. I won’t have it, Captain

Langley," she added, getting frightened at his determination, and speaking decidedly, to hide her fear. "It is like a scene in a play, and I don't like private theatricals; take me back to the ball-room directly."

"Oh, Lady Geraldine, do listen; you are so cruel!"

"Cruel!" she echoed - "absurd! Don't let us have any more of this; say what you have to say, and have done with it. I cannot stay here long, it's so queer. Suppose any one came?" and she glanced nervously round.

"Oh, Geraldine, darling! don't you remember what you said at Wrinkleburgh? You said you would tell me my fate when you knew me better; won't you do it now?"

Geraldine felt intensely provoked. He was going on absurdly, she thought; if he would only ask her to marry him, she could say "no" at once; but when he raved like this, she did not know what to answer. She stood, opening and shutting her fan, feeling the position growing more awkward every minute.

"Geraldine, love! speak to me!"

Geraldine grew frantic with annoyance. She could not say "I will not marry you," when he had not asked her, and she could not even speak any of the kind words, with which

naturally she would have softened her refusal; perplexity, and a choking inclination to cry, that must be stifled, made her flippant.

"If you don't stand away from that door, and let me pass, I'll never speak to you again!" she cried impatiently, making a step forward.

Langley seized her hand. "Oh, listen to me! I love you so desperately! You said once you should like me some day; do have pity on me; you will be my wife, won't you?"

Just then two officers passed down the corridor. Langley, with his back to them, neither saw nor heard anything; but Geraldine caught the look of surprise on one face, and heard a laugh, as the steps died away. She felt wild with anger; how they would talk, and say it was queer, and fast, for her to be standing there, while Langley made a goose of himself before any one who chanced to pass. She wrenched away her hand.

"You do everything you can to aggravate me," she exclaimed passionately; "I detest you!"

She repented the moment the words were out of her mouth. She never thought that Reginald Langley's eyes could change as they



did then. His face looked as if he longed to kill somebody at that minute, as he answered—

“You shall never marry anybody else; when I hear of it, I’ll shoot either you or him.”

Poor Langley felt terribly, but unfortunately his passion took a rather theatrical form. From some people, the threat would have frightened Geraldine; from Langley, she felt only amused at the absurdity of silly, good-natured Reginald trying to terrify her so foolishly. She laughed, and said—

“If you shoot anybody, be kind enough to shoot yourself. Suppose you get your pistols ready, for there is nothing to prevent my marrying Major Webb to-morrow, if I choose, Monseigneur;” and so speaking, she passed through the door; then, hesitating which way to turn, added—

“Please don’t be absurd, Captain Langley; give me your arm; let us go back like two rational beings, not a pair of maniacs preparing for Hanwell.”

Langley offered his arm, but would not answer a word to her chatter, as they traversed the passage, and appeared in the ante-room, where Mr. Grey met them, and asked Geraldine if she was ready, for the carriage was waiting.

“Good-night, Captain Langley; keep a place in Hanwell for me,” she said, putting out her hand, but the Hussar walked quickly away.

Geraldine laughed and chatted merrily all the way to the hotel, neither caring for Reginald’s anger, nor thinking much of his threat.

The next morning’s breakfast was necessarily a hurried one, for were they not all departing different ways?—the earl bound for Paris, and Caroline and Gertrude on a six weeks’ tour of last visits to relations and friends, before the younger sister’s wedding, which was fixed for the first week in the following April; only Mr. Grey and Geraldine were to return to Wrinkleburgh.

They all drove to the Colchester station, and there it was a matter of finding different trains, separating luggage, and speaking last adieux.

Colonel St. John met them, and no one, except Caroline, remarked how odd it was Reginald never appeared, while only Geraldine guessed his reason for keeping away.

The sisters went first to Torquay, to see an invalid aunt, with whom they stayed a fortnight; then into Warwickshire, and so

worked their way to Grantham Park, where they arrived about a month after the Hussar ball. At Grantham they expected to find Alfred, but one of the first things Mabel told them was, that her brother had gone to London that morning.

"What can take him there just now?" asked Caroline.

"I'm sure I don't know," answered Lady Grantham; "he never told me a word about going till last night; then he said he was obliged to be in London on business, and he should probably go from there to Paris, so I need not expect him back here till next shooting season."

"How like Alfred!" exclaimed Gertrude, and the sisters thought no more of their brother's sudden departure, till they discovered a startling reason for it.

Their visit had lasted three weeks, and they were returning to Wrinkleburgh in four days, when one evening Sir Harry was presiding at a farmers' dinner, and Caroline had gone to her room with a bad headache; Lady Grantham and Gertrude were sitting in the drawing-room, one sister reading, the other writing letters; about nine o'clock, a ring at the hall door made Mabel exclaim—

“Who can be coming at this hour?”

She had hardly spoken, when Mrs. Harley, the wife of the vicar of Cairnham, was ushered in.

Cairnham village was only two miles off, and Grantham Park was in Cairnham parish, and of course the Greys knew well the vicar and his wife.

Mrs. Harley was a little dark-eyed energetic woman, with two ideas in her head—her husband’s surpassing talents as a preacher (unfortunately few people agreed with her on this point), and the welfare of the numerous girls and young women who formed her Bible-class.

Both the sisters, as they rose to welcome their unexpected visitor, noticed her unusual excitement; the bright black eyes twinkled oddly, and she sat down, then half rose, and reseated herself nervously, inquiring for Miss Grey: she wanted to speak to her for just one moment.

“Carrie is in bed with a bad headache,” Mabel observed, adding, “cannot we do as well—is it anything about the parish?”

Mrs. Harley looked unaccountably disquieted when she heard of Caroline’s illness.

“My dear Mabel, I’m afraid not, I want to see your sister for a moment; will you ask her

to see me, just a moment?" laying stress upon the short time, as if to remove the impression that her errand was of much importance.

Gertrude rose. "I'll go and tell Carrie, but indeed, Mrs. Harley, I wish you would make us do instead, for poor Carrie has been ill all day with neuralgia."

While her sister was away, Mabel chatted of Mr. Harley and the village, but Mrs. Harley evidently but half listened. Gertrude returned, saying—

"Carrie is so sorry, Mrs. Harley, but her head is quite racking, she says; will you please tell me anything that is wanted, and it shall be done."

Mrs. Harley looked very blank, as if extremely puzzled, evidently loth to comply, yet hardly knowing what else to do. Suddenly she said—

"Will you give me a sheet of paper and a pencil?"

"Oh, directly," exclaimed Mabel, and she pushed forward a small writing table.

Mrs. Harley took pencil and paper, wrote a few lines, then, to the sisters' astonishment, put the writing into an envelope, fastened it together, and asked Gertrude to take it to her

sister. Gertrude complied, and appeared in Miss Grey's room, exclaiming—

“Mrs. Harley must be quite mad to-night. Here is some mysterious writing she has sent you, actually sealed up. What can it be? Do look directly.”

Caroline took the paper, while Gertrude held a lighted candle close to her bedside.

“My DEAR CAROLINE,

“I must see you to-night about something very important. It concerns your brother. Let me beg of you to say nothing to your sisters till I have seen you; it must be immediately—to-morrow may be too late.”

Caroline checked an exclamation of astonishment. All kinds of terrible accidents that might have happened to either of the brothers, flashed through her mind, and her face was very anxious, as she spoke—

“Ask Mrs. Harley to come here directly. Oh, be quick, Gerty!”

“What is it? Oh, do tell me,” urged Gertrude; “you look frightened to death.”

“I don't know yet. Don't be uneasy; I hope it is not really much. Go directly.”

Gertrude flew downstairs.

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"Mrs. Harley, please come to Caroline. Is it about my father?" she asked breathlessly.

"No, indeed it is not; and, my dear girl," said Mrs. Harley, "don't look like that; it is no accident, or anything that may not be very likely prevented. I cannot tell you more till I have seen your sister."

A few seconds more, and Mrs. Harley was sitting by Caroline's bedside, while, at her request, Gertrude went down again to Mabel. The sisters speculated, and talked, as minute after minute passed, and it was a good quarter of an hour before Mrs. Harley's voice was heard on the stairs calling Gertrude.

Meanwhile Mrs. Harley began—

"Caroline, do you know why your sister's maid, Rosa, is going to London to-morrow?"

"She isn't going to London; she is only going for a few days to stay with an old friend of her mother's at York."

"She tells Lady Grantham so, my dear, but I know for a fact, she's going to London."

"It's very wrong of her, then, to tell such a story. But, Mrs. Harley, is it really only about Rosa? You frightened me so much. You said my brother, and I fancied all kinds of accidents. I'm quite glad it's only Rosa's misdeeds."

Mrs. Harley's face was grave, and her voice nervous, as she asked—

“Did you ever think your brother was attached to Rosa?”

“Good gracious!—no!” exclaimed Caroline, sitting up in bed, her eyes quite frightened. “What is it? Oh, Mrs. Harley, you have something terrible to tell me; please say it at once.”

“My dear, I came to tell you—no doubt we shall be able to stop it—but I was wretched when I heard Mr. Grey was not with you at Grantham; the fact is——” Mrs. Harley sank her voice, as if afraid the walls might hear, “Rosa is going to London to-morrow to be married to your brother.”

“Oh, surely not! Which brother?” breathlessly asked the sister.

“Alfred,” was the answer. Instantly the whole affair flashed upon Caroline; she remembered what had passed before they left Cairnham; months ago.

“How foolish never to have seen it; never to have dreamt of Alfred caring for her himself when he spoke so savagely of her lover, Tom Mills; her proper lover,” thought Caroline, “one in her own rank of life; the idea of Rosa daring to think of Alfred!”



The blood flushed in Caroline's proud cheek as she thought of the low-born sister-in-law, who was so basely returning their kindnesses. It must, it should, be stopped. Caroline would die sooner than that her brother, her favourite brother, the future head of the family, should so disgrace himself!

She eagerly questioned Mrs. Harley, and found that the vicar's wife, having heard a rumour in the village of Rosa going to be married to some grand gentleman, had gone to question the mother, and found her answers very unsatisfactory. Of course Mrs. Thompson denied the rumour, but with such hesitation, mingled with absurd hints of Rosa's beauty, and gentlemen's admiration, that Mrs. Harley felt half inclined to shake the foolish woman for encouraging her daughter in what Mrs. Harley was inclined to fear would turn to open disgrace; but when the vicar's wife inquired further in the village, she found that the mother was by no means so silly, only an unscrupulous woman, bent on marrying her pretty daughter to a gentleman. Everything betrayed that Alfred Grey had resumed his old flirtation with her; indeed, at a second visit, Mrs. Thompson almost admitted that Mr. Grey was to meet Rosa in London.

"I only got at this an hour ago," added Mrs. Harley, "and I came here directly, but before I came, I took the liberty of sending our old gardener, a very trusty, steady man, as you know, down to Mrs. Thompson's cottage, telling him not to lose sight of her, and if she attempted to leave the house, to lock her in; and, my dear, you may be sure he'll do it, if necessary. I was not going to have her warning her daughter, and the minx off to town, to-night perhaps, and married to-morrow, before any one could stop her; and, my dear Caroline, I hope you think I did right."

"Indeed I do. Thank you so much!" exclaimed Caroline.

Then she thought for a few moments. Caroline was never long in making up her mind. In a very few seconds she determined to go to London herself, see Alfred, and persuade him to give up this terrible marriage that would bring disgrace upon the whole family. And though she said "yes" to Mrs. Harley's repeated regrets at Mr. Grey's absence, in her secret heart Caroline could not help rejoicing that he was not there. She knew there was much more chance of Alfred yielding to her, than to his father.

She rapidly explained her plan to the vicar's wife; begged her to keep guard over Mrs. Thompson, promising herself to lock Rosa up in her room before she could start for London; then to go there herself; contrive to see her brother—and she added cheerily—

“I hope, thanks to you, dear Mrs. Harley, it will come all right. I need not, I am sure, beg you to say nothing to any one, except your husband.”

“My dear, of course not. I never said a word about it to old Joseph. He thought directly, Mrs. Thompson had gone a little out of her head, and so had to be watched. And I let him think so. I wish you every success; and now I must go.”

Caroline lifted up her face, gave Mrs. Harley a long affectionate hug of thankfulness, and asked her to call Gertrude; adding, she herself should tell her sisters, but there must not be a word said to any other creature. And when, in obedience to Mrs. Harley's call, Gertrude appeared, her sister told her to escort the visitor downstairs, and then come with Mabel to her room.

Long and earnestly, after Mrs. Harley had gone, did the sisters discuss this terrible story; sometimes half inclined to believe it a delu-

sion that must end in nothing, oftener remembering incidents that, unnoticed at the time, carried conviction now.

Caroline talked fiercely of Rosa's impudence and Rosa's vanity; Mabel declared it to be Alfred's fault, inveighing against his deceit and bad taste; while Gertrude sat almost silent, perplexed and miserable, feeling her brother's folly and Rosa's ingratitude. How could she repay their kindness with such a cruel blow? and yet—if Alfred loved her, and she returned his love? Gertrude could not but feel gently for real affection, however unwise. Rosa was beautiful. And to her, Alfred must have all the fascination a gentleman invariably has for a woman accustomed to associate with the rough lower class. Something of this Gertrude ventured to say in defence of the culprits. Caroline grew quite angry at such an excuse.

"What business has Rosa, a servant, a common low-born girl, to look at Alfred?—to know whether he's fascinating or not? It's a disgrace to her to think of such a thing."

Mabel laughed. "Upon my word, Carrie, that is like you. It will be anything but a disgrace to Rosa Thompson, to become Mrs. Alfred Grey."

"How can you speak of such a thing?" exclaimed Miss Grey. "That girl shall be hung first."

"Wanting to marry a gentleman is not a hanging offence now, my good Queen Elizabeth, whatever it may have been in the days you ought to have lived in. Don't you wish it was now—particularly when the bridegroom is to be your favourite brother? You and Gertrude are so very antique—she, with her rubbish about Rosa's broken heart, and you, with your three-century-old nonsense about presumption. I see nothing to go wild about. Of course we must stop this marriage if we can. It's our interest, for the sake of the family, to do so. But, all the same, it's Rosa's interest to 'better herself.'"

"'Better herself!'" scornfully ejaculated Miss Grey. "You talk as vulgarly as Rosa herself."

"My dear, don't annihilate me. I still call Breffny considerably better than her mother's cottage, don't you? And depend upon it, Gerty, it's no case of heart at all. Alfred does like Rosa, no doubt, just as he admires every pretty woman that comes in his way. I only wonder he has not married some queer person long before this. When he is once off, he does

not care what he does. Fortunately, his love fits never last long, or we should have a perpetual series of would-be Mrs. Alfred Greys. Rosa is an ambitious little wretch, and has worked him up to marry her. I don't blame her; she's only wise in her generation. It's her interest to marry Alfred; though it's our interest to stop such a match. And, knowing how changeable and weak Alfred is, we shall be very stupid if we cannot do it. What do you say to that, Caroline?"

"I have not patience to listen to you. You have no decent feeling about it—making fun of such a disgraceful thing. I wish you 'good night.' I'm very tired, and there is plenty to do before I go to bed. I must start by the first train in the morning."

"I will stay and help you," Gertrude said. "It's just as well the servants should to-night know nothing about your journey. Mabel, you had better go and keep Rosa undressing you as long as you can. Don't say a word to Harry when he comes home."

Mabel complied, kissed her elder sister, and departed, musing as she walked along the passage—

"How those two dear old-world things will talk with horror of the long line of the blue-

blooded Greys broken by upstart Rosa! It's comical to find people actually believing in ancestry in this money-worshipping age. We Greys have blood, and the Granthams have money as well, so I don't know that I have done badly, but I wish Harry was not such a fool; it's weary work despising one's husband."

At this point in her reflections she gained her room and stood before the large cheval glass, looking fixedly at the reflection of her slender figure and well-featured face. Then she said half-aloud—

"Well, I ought to have been able to get something better than a countrified baronet, with nothing in his head but sheep and oxen, and as fat as his own prize animals. "Heigh-ho! how I wish I was any one but myself!"

Another sigh, and Mabel Grantham rang the bell for Rosa, and began to undress.

Meanwhile Gertrude packed just a few things for one night. Caroline hoped to come back the same day, but that might not be possible. She arranged everything for her sister's comfort, not speaking, till she wished her "good-night."

"Is there anything else?" she asked.  
"How I wish I could go with you!"

"So do I; but I'm afraid that can hardly

be. Alfred would be provoked at two of us coming after him ; besides, it would create a double sensation here, and you must keep guard over Rosa."

As she kissed her sister, Miss Grey added—

"Gerty, don't get up to see me off; it's far better not. I must go very early, for I don't know where to find Alfred, unless I go by the same train Rosa was to travel by, and so catch him at the station."

And so she did.

Alfred Grey, sauntering carelessly about the station, in an irreproachable coat, and with a flower in his button-hole, expecting his bride, was somewhat dismayed to see his sister emerge from a first-class carriage ; he walked to meet her, however, exclaiming—

"What on earth brought you here ! Are you by yourself ? "

"Yes ; can you go with me to Lowndes Square ? "

As she travelled up to town, Caroline had thought over her plans. If she could induce her brother to go with her to Lady Grantham's town house, they could talk the matter over quietly. She dreaded his demanding an explanation at the station.

"What are you going to Lowndes Square



for?" the brother asked; "the house is all shut up."

"The woman who takes care of it will be in it. I hope to be there only a few hours, if you will take me there, that is all I want."

As his sister spoke, Alfred had been glancing nervously round. How awkward it would be if Rosa were to appear, and she might do so at any moment! He trusted she had seen Caroline, and would have the sense to stay quietly in a railway carriage till he was free to come to her; but every minute his sister stood there increased the risk of detection. He answered hurriedly—

"You'll have to go in a cab then, for my trap isn't here. Come along."

Caroline thought how easily she had gained the first point in the difficult game. Her triumph was short-lived. Alfred put her into a cab, then excused himself going any further.

"I'm very sorry, Carrie, but really you'll be as safe as a church. What can happen to you? You'll be there in no time, and I've an engagement."

"Do come, please, Alfred; it will not keep you long."

"I can't; upon my word I can't."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see, the fact is, I came here to meet a friend."

"Who?" asked the sister, feeling desperately that the explanation must come now.

"Oh! a fellow you don't know," he answered carelessly.

She leant towards him as he stood with one foot on the step of the open door, and whispered—

"Alfred, come with me, I must speak to you quietly; the person you expected is not coming."

"What the devil do you mean?" exclaimed Grey, a suspicion dawning upon him that his plans were discovered.

"Come with me to Lowndes Square and I will tell you. It is no good waiting here."

"I don't know what you are talking about; but if you have come on some fool's errand, I suppose I must listen to your rubbish," Grey answered sulkily, getting into the cab.

"Drive to No. — Lowndes Square," he shouted to the driver; then he put up both windows and turned to his sister.

"Now, Caroline, tell me what you mean. What has brought you to town in this ridiculous way?"

Caroline nerved herself for the battle.

"You came to the train to meet Rosa, Alfred."

"Stuff!" he exclaimed, "what put that into your head?"

"Alfred, it is no good denying it, for I know for a fact she was to come by this train!"

"Well! and if I did mean to meet her, what business is it of yours? Can't I do a simple kindness to Rosa without your meddling? Did you rush off to town, to prevent my speaking to a girl I've nothing to do but go to my sister's house to see any hour of the day? The girl is strange in London, so I said I would see her safely from one station to another; what's the harm in that?"

"Alfred, you know you like Rosa, and it's disgraceful; it will bring disgrace on us all. Remember, you will be the head of the family some day."

Grey laughed; yet despite his habitual coolness, his voice had a nervous ring in it, as he answered—

"Your absurdity is beyond everything! What is there disgraceful in taking care, for half an hour, of my sister's maid?"

"Don't try to deceive me any more," Caroline said. "I know all;—that you and Rosa were to be married to-day, and I have come

to speak to you, to entreat you, for the sake of yourself, for us all, not to do such a terrible thing. Alfred, I implore you, not to be so mad. Such a marriage would ruin you for life, cut you off from us all, from your friends, from your position ; surely you will not do it ?”

Alfred was staggered. Caroline spoke with intense earnestness, and her brother was one naturally apt to take any view strongly put before him. He had drifted into a promise to marry Rosa, and while she was with him fully meant to fulfil his word. He loved her quite enough for that, and his indolent, easy mind never thought of the consequences. He knew his family would naturally object if he told them beforehand, but he trusted they would receive Rosa when the thing was done. In truth, he had never looked the objections straight in the face. He had begun by slyly flirting, and talking nonsense with a pretty servant ; it had gone on from time to time ; the secret meetings were very pleasant, and had a savour of generosity and risk on his part that gave zest to his love-making.

When, at the break-up of the Breffny establishment, Rosa Thompson was transferred to Lady Grantham, Alfred kept up a desultory correspondence with his sister's maid, but no

actual harm came of their love-making, till Alfred re-appeared at Grantham.

Bitterly disappointed at Lady Geraldine's rejection of his suit, for rejection her words implied, and his vanity hurt that any girl should prefer Langley to himself, Alfred was in just the mood to prize Rosa's passionate warmth far beyond its real worth. She did love Captain Grey, as far as it was in her nature to love any one, and she had no scruple in saying so over and over again. Alfred responded with more ardour than perhaps he really felt, because pleased at the contrast between the indifferent high-born lady and the impassioned servant; perhaps, too, he was inclined to wreak his disappointment in one of his own class by over-rating a lower one. He sought Rosa out, and during his sojourn at Grantham they had continual conversations and secret meetings. Probably Alfred himself would have stopped there but for Rosa; it was ambitious Rosa, who, by taking it for granted that he meant to marry her, first put the notion into his head, and it was Rosa's sharp worldliness that kept her lover to his unguarded promise.

As Caroline went on to draw a picture of her father's anger, and the family's disgrace,

and declared unhesitatingly that not one of them would ever speak to or notice Rosa in any way, if he persisted in marrying her, Alfred was still more staggered. Caroline did not speak angrily; she said at once that they should always care for him, always receive him; but never, as long as one of them lived, should Rosa gain a word.

Grey began to see what his rashness might bring on his head, and could not but be glad that, after all, the intended plan was not yet completed, that there was still a possibility of averting this family quarrel.

"I've a good mind to give it up," he muttered half aloud.

Caroline caught the words.

"Oh, Alfred, if you only will, everything will be all right, and not another word will I say on the subject."

"But how on earth am I to get out of it?" he asked sulkily. He might give in, perhaps he would be obliged to; if so, Caroline must take all the trouble off his hands. She was ready enough to do so, and before they reached Lowndes Square, she had promised that she herself would undertake all arrangements with Rosa and her mother; that a liberal sum of money should be given to the disappointed

bride; and everything should be settled without the least trouble or annoyance to him.

"I expect she'll come bothering after me," Grey observed.

"She shall not; I promise she shall not," exclaimed Caroline.

"I wouldn't trust to that. How can you stop it? No! I tell you what I shall do: I shall go off with Jack Fitzroy to Albania—he starts next week in his yacht on a shooting expedition. He asked me to join him a week ago and I declined. I'll go now, and then none of you confounded women can set upon me."

It was pleasant to be classed with Rosa! yet Caroline, thankful for her success, held her tongue. The brother and sister spent half an hour in the large deserted-looking house. How desolate and miserable a London house can look, with shutters up, blinds down, and furniture packed away or covered, no one can imagine who has not visited his town house in December.

Alfred solemnly promised to go abroad immediately; to start for Paris the next evening, and be picked up by his friend's yacht at Marseilles. When this was settled, Caroline was glad to get into a cab, and drive with her brother to the station.

At an hotel near, he insisted upon her having some luncheon. She tried to eat, but could not manage it; a lump seemed to rise in her throat, her eyes filled with tears, and she was glad to make the excuse of taking off her hat to go upstairs and indulge in a good cry. Hardly a moment had she slept the night before; the hurried journey, the warm arguments, had tried her nerves; outwardly calm, she had suffered a torture of anxiety; now the relief was almost painful, and the tears would have their way—they did her good though. When she rejoined her brother she could talk cheerfully; though still unable to care for luncheon, she was refreshed by a cup of tea, and declared herself quite equal to the railway journey back to Grantham.

Alfred put her into the carriage, spoke to the guard, and waited till the train glided slowly out of the station; then he took out of his pocket a piece of paper, struck a match, and held the paper to it, till it was burned away, muttering—

“There goes thirty pounds—wasted! Hang it all!”

Then he lighted a cigar, and walked back to his club. It was a special marriage license that he had so quietly burned.



Caroline had willingly undertaken to settle affairs with Rosa and her mother, but her confidence in her powers of doing so satisfactorily began to fail as she thought it all over. The train sped rapidly on ; at first she felt nothing but relief. Alfred, after all, had behaved well.

Ah ! could she think that ?—not quite. He had acted as it was well for her hopes that he should act, but it was hardly a line of conduct she could admire. Much as she desired to stop this marriage, Caroline would have respected her brother far more had he shown some firmness, and sufficient love for the woman he had promised to marry, to make giving her up a hard task ; yet when did Alfred care enough for anything but himself, to make resigning it a sorrow ? Her brother's weakness made her plan succeed, yet she could not bear to think of his selfish love of comfort. For the girl he professed to love in his way, Alfred Grey would not brave a few sharp words from, and an uncomfortable scene with—his sister !

It had been the same all through life, and Captain Grey was thoroughly satisfied with himself. He went off comfortably on his sporting tour, with the consciousness of having

done quite a noble thing—of having sacrificed his own inclinations to his family's wish ;—while Caroline perplexed and worried herself over the difficult task of inducing Rosa and her mother to give up, without public scandal, their all but captured prize.

Harassed with doubt as to the possibility of this, Miss Grey stepped out of the railway carriage, and had begun an inquiry if there was any one from Grantham to meet her, when Gertrude came up, an eager question on her lips, though she spoke but one word—

“ What ? ”

“ It's all right,” whispered Caroline.

“ You brick ! ” returned Gertrude—and no more passed till the sisters were rolling swiftly homewards in the Grantham brougham ; then Caroline, relating her day's adventures, told every word she had said, every reply of her brother ; and loud were Gertrude's praises. Then Caroline asked—

“ How have you managed with Rosa ? ”

“ Oh ! you don't know the fuss she made. Directly you were off I sent for her to the billiard-room—I thought that would be the quietest place ; and when she came I turned the key, and kept her there for half an hour. At last she rang both the bells furiously, and

knocked at the door; so I spoke to her through the door, and told her she must remain quietly there till you came back. I suppose she found out then what it all meant, for she became quite frantic, pulled the bells almost down, and knocked, and I verily believe, kicked, at the door, and screamed to me to let her out. I thought the other servants must hear; so I went in, and there I found Rosa running about the room with a cue in her hand; what she meant to do with it I don't know. She was just like a child in a fit of temper, and would not listen to a word I said; so I told her I should go away, and she flew to the door and tried to get out. But at last I suppose she found out it did no good to be so silly, for she calmed down, and I told her you had gone to London to meet Alfred; that we knew all about the proposed marriage, and that, as I could not say anything more till you or Alfred came back, she must stay quietly in that room till the evening. Of course she refused, and talked absurdly about her rights, and that I had no power to keep her in prison. At length I persuaded her that it was her best interest not to make a scene, that anything of that sort invariably prevented any compromise, and that Alfred would never

stand a public exposure. I put it to her, for her own sake—that, if Alfred did not marry her, would she like any one to know all about it? Before long she was sulkily silent—of course I took her some dinner, and tea too—and in the billiard-room she is still. I left Mabel on guard; to-morrow morning we must send for the mother, and have it out with her. You had better not see Rosa to-night. I will tell her enough to keep her quiet till after you have had a good night's rest."

## CHAPTER VII.

“TAKE THE GIPSY’S WARNING NEXT TIME,  
YOUNG SIR.”

“She was chill, and I was hot.

\* \* \* \*

And in that wild angered mood  
I was sport for Satan’s brood,  
Sang the shot, and sprang the blood,  
Fiends or angels spake his greeting !”

MEANWHILE something had happened, about which Mr. Grey had written to Gertrude, making the sisters still more anxious to return to their father.

During the first fortnight of their absence, matters passed as usual at Wrinkleburgh. Geraldine missed her friends exceedingly, and made up for their loss by bestowing extra time and conversation on the curate, until one day Reginald Langley paid a visit to Granite House.

Lady Geraldine had not seen or heard anything of him since the Colchester ball, and was much shocked at his appearance.

Langley, intensely mortified at the ball, had unfortunately taken to a course of drinking. He had sense enough to keep sober on duty, but was moody and cross, avoiding his companions, and drinking hard in his own rooms. His brother officers wondered at the alteration, and one or two remonstrated with him sharply; but good-natured Langley was savagely angry at the first word, and (as Major Thurlow expressed it) seemed bent on “going to the dogs.”

Presently a fever seized him to see Geraldine again, to appeal to her, to try his chance once more. He came to Wrinkleburgh, and rang at Granite House, and, being told she was out, said he would call again in an hour, and set off to the Blue Lion to spend the intervening time.

Anxious and nervous, of course he resorted to his enemy, the brandy bottle, and when he re-appeared at Granite House, though not exactly tipsy, he was by no means his usual self.

Lady Geraldine was horrified. The flushed face, the excited manner, frightened, while

they disgusted her; yet she pitied him, and was divided between a strong wish to send him away, and the fear of his making a scene and showing his condition to Mr. Grey, who she knew would be exceedingly annoyed at his nephew's conduct in coming to her like this. Mrs. Studley was out, which made matters worse; so Geraldine had to rely on herself alone. She sat, confused and uncomfortable, while Langley talked, sometimes sensibly enough, but every now and then speaking what she felt he could not really mean; at last he stammered into the subject of the ball.

"I think you behaved very unkindly to me that night."

"Oh, that's nonsense; don't let's talk any more about it. What train do you go back by?" she answered, hoping to lead away from the subject.

"We must talk about it," he muttered, with tipsy obstinacy. "I want to know if you mean what you said?"

"I always mean what I say," Geraldine observed lightly, affecting not to understand.

"You are trifling with me," he cried, "you have behaved badly to me all along."

"Captain Langley," Geraldine said, rising and drawing herself up, forgetting in her

annoyance his excited state; "I will not allow you to express an opinion upon anything I do. I am sorry, but I have an engagement, and will not detain you any longer."

Even his confused brain understood her, and, angry in his turn, he exclaimed—

"You really mean what you said that night?"

"Of course I do," she answered, still standing.

"Then I, too, mean what I threatened. You will see if I do not."

"You said you would shoot yourself," she replied, misquoting what he had threatened; "but you are alive now," she added, scornfully, thinking his threat cowardly and never dreaming of its being serious.

"I'll keep it this time," he muttered.

What more he might have said, Geraldine never knew, for, seeing through the window Mrs. Studley coming into the garden, she gave her visitor a bow, and went to meet the governess, leaving the Hussar no alternative but to take up his hat and depart out of the front door, while the ladies still remained in the garden.

Whether poor Langley had always meant to fulfil his threat, or whether the hard drinking



had affected his brain, or whether disappointment worked upon a mind naturally weak and unused to strong passions, is uncertain; but the second morning after his visit to Wrinkleburgh, Geraldine Everley, with her eyes wide open with fright, and her cheeks white, rushed into Dinorlan, where Mr. Grey was eating his solitary breakfast, and pushed an open letter into his hand without a word:—

“Before you receive this, I shall be dead. You said I should not do it, but you see I have. You said you cared for what people say; you will find I have taken care that no one can think you have anything to do with my death. My guns and pistols will be about, and it will be said I shot myself by accident, while cleaning them. Only you will know better. You do not care for me, but I know you will be sorry; for you did not mean to be cruel, but you have made my life not worth having.

“REGINALD LANGLEY.”

“Has he done it? Can he have really done it?” panted Geraldine, looking at Mr. Grey, as if he held the scales of life and death.

“No, my dear child, I do not think so.

Don’t be so terrified. I believe Reginald not likely to kill himself. I should not have thought him the fellow to threaten a woman like this, either,” he muttered to himself.

“But he says he has.”

“People do not always do as they say. I haven’t patience with his folly.”

“He is much altered lately,” Geraldine said; and Mr. Grey, asking how, she went on to tell of Langley’s last visit.

Her listener became more annoyed at his nephew, though the narration further confirmed his idea that the letter was only a threat.

“Depend upon it, when he wrote, he was half screwed. I will go to Colchester to-day, and see after him; and, my dear, you had better let me keep that foolish piece of paper. I shall tell him he ought to be ashamed of himself.”

While he spoke, a servant appeared, and handed his master something on a waiter. Geraldine trembled when she saw it was a telegram. Mr. Grey hastily tore it open. It was from his sister, Mrs. Langley:—

“Reginald has had a terrible accident. I am just starting for Colchester; please meet me there.”

No more ; no account of the accident ; only the bare fact—that it had taken place.

Geraldine sobbed, and entreated Mr. Grey to take her to Colchester, but he would not hear of it. He was very gentle, but somehow a revulsion of feeling had seized him. He would not blame poor Reginald, who might be dead ; and in his heart, he was inclined to blame her, who had caused the death ; it was irrational, but few of us are quite just in a catastrophe. Geraldine had done nothing worse than she had done before that telegram arrived, yet her conduct seemed worse to Mr. Grey, and he did not feel as much compassion for her distress. He was sorry for her, and promised to telegraph from Colchester what had really happened, the moment he knew himself.

Mr. Grey started ; and all her life Geraldine Everley will never forget that half day of miserable suspense.

Meanwhile a terrible scene was enacted at Colchester. Langley wrote his letter, walked into the town, and posted it himself, then dined at mess, where he was the life of the party. For some weeks he had been gloomy and silent ; this evening his laugh was the loudest, his fun the readiest. Langley was himself again, or rather a brilliant, feverish

copy of his old self. He had a magnificent bass voice, and was the musical genius of the regiment, and no guest-night was complete without a song from Langley. As twelve struck, the roof was re-echoing to the tones of his fine voice, as he led the chorus in the famous old North-country hunting song that celebrates the achievements of John Peel.

As the officers dispersed their different ways, they went on humming the chorus, and the notes died away with their footsteps in the echoing corridors. Soon all were quiet and asleep in Colchester barracks.

To one soldier, however, sleep never came. Langley shut himself in his room, locked both doors, pulled out gun-case and pistol-case, disposed the weapons on the table, with sponges and rag, and then, hour after hour, he paced backwards and forwards in the midst of the preparations for his death. How horrid it seems to write this, and yet Langley felt no horror. A sort of satisfaction in the grief he would cause to Geraldine possessed him. Ah! she would feel for him, when she heard; she would not laugh at his love any more. He seemed to take a pleasure in dwelling on this; strange, that nothing else—no thought of his mother, or his friends—troubled him. He did

not for one moment regard the eternity into which he was rushing so recklessly; the one love that had weakened his brain, possessed it entirely.

The grey dawn crept into the room; the time he had previously fixed was come. He looked at his watch, waited till the very minute of five, then snatched up the revolver, lying ready. The bright barrel touched his mouth—his hand was on the trigger;—what made him pause?

It has been asserted, that in the supreme moment of our lives, when body and soul are about to part, the whole of our past career passes instantaneously before us, every event plainly marked out. Was it this process, or was it a good angel, who that instant brought to Reginald Langley's mind, Mr. Everley's story of the gipsy's prophecy? He seemed to see again the old man, to hear his voice repeat the very words he uttered the night Langley first met his ill-omened love.

Had not the gipsy said, "I hear the shot! I see the blood!" Was this the fulfilment?

The sudden conviction staggered him like an actual blow, and his fingers pulled the trigger with a jerk that unsettled the deadly aim. A flash, a moment of intense pain, then

utter darkness, and Reginald Langley lay unconscious on the floor, with one side of his face completely shattered. The bullet had sped its bloody way, through bone and muscle, to the jaw, then turned, and, missing a dozen vital places by a hair’s breadth, tore through the cheek, grazed the forehead, and buried itself in his hair.

At seven o’clock, Langley’s servant entered his master’s bed-room with hot water. Finding him not there, he walked to the sitting-room door. It was locked; a thing Cobb had never known before. He knocked; no answer. He called, “ Captain Langley—sir.” No answer still. Then he walked through the passage to the other door of the sitting-room, and repeated the process there. Again no answer—only dead silence. Cobb, getting alarmed, repaired to Captain Downe’s rooms, and startled that officer from his sleep by an urgent request to speak to him immediately.

“ What can the fool want?” muttered Downe, not pleased at being thus roused. “ Send him in here. Now, Cobb, what is it?”

“ Please, sir, there’s something wrong with the captain. I can’t get into his room. Both doors are locked; and I can’t make him hear.”

"He's fast asleep, of course. Have you roused me only for this rubbish?"

"He's not in bed. It's never been slept in. And I knocked and shouted. There's something dreadful happened, I know."

"Pooh! what could happen, you fool? I'll come and see." And Downe hastily threw on his clothes.

Arrived at Langley's door, he shouted and knocked. All to no purpose.

"Break open the door," he said at last.

By this time a dozen sergeants and privates had collected. A few vigorous kicks, and the door yielded. Downe sprang into the room. There, stretched on the floor, was Langley. He might have been asleep, but for the dark stains on the carpet. He lay quite still; his face turned away; while the morning breeze stole in at the open window, rustled the papers on the table, and gently lifted the dark brown hair. They raised him up, and then saw the wounded ghastly face.

Cold, unconscious, and bloody, his head lay on Downe's knee, while Cobb exclaimed—

"He's dead!"

"He's not. I feel his heart beating feebly. Call the doctor."

Surgeon Walrond came, and examined the

wound, and followed the course of the bullet with a probe, eliciting a low groan from the patient.

“Carry him into his bed. Send for my orderly, and a couple of hospital nurses, and clear out every one of you. Of course he’s not dead; and he’ll not die either, unless tetanus sets in. But he’ll be a nice object to look at after this day’s work.

This was the report Marmaduke Grey telegraphed to Wrinkleburgh, a few hours later—Reginald would not die; but he was scarred for life.

Geraldine had cried till she was exhausted. When the relief came it was almost painful. But she soon cheered up, and overwhelmed Mrs. Studley with visions of what she would do when he was well again. She seemed to consider it only natural that she should make up for his wounds by marrying the invalid; and, just at first, she forgot all her previous objections.

Mrs. Studley, however, declined approving such visions. Captain Langley, after his recklessness, was no fit husband for one who required a guide, as well as a lover. And the governess drew such a picture of the evils consequent on two such feather-headed people



going through life together, that Geraldine grew half frightened at her intended reparation.

Mr. Grey came back, leaving Reginald to be nursed by his mother. When the immediate danger was over, Marmaduke Grey was glad to turn his back on Colchester. Though feeling obliged, for his daughter's sake, to be outwardly civil, he felt anything but friendly to Colonel St. John; though even he allowed that the colonel had been kind and judicious as regarded poor Langley.

Rumours began to get about that it was not quite an accident; and had he died, and an inquest been necessary, the position in which the revolver was found, and some other awkward circumstances, would probably have elicited the real facts. But fortunately this was avoided, and his brother officers' surmises were put a stop to by a few words spoken by the colonel that evening before mess.

"Gentlemen," he said, "we all like poor Langley, and I am sure not one of us would willingly do him an injury. I must ask you to talk as little as possible about this affair. Some surmises, however unfounded, may be very damaging to his military career, if they go beyond the barracks. I shall report the

affair to the Horse Guards as an accident caused by carelessly cleaning a revolver. And I am sure poor Langley may trust us all to hold our tongues, for the sake of one of the most popular fellows in the service.”

A chorus of voices declared the colonel quite right. And henceforth they all stuck resolutely to the accident theory.

Geraldine meanwhile grew more and more puzzled how to act. One day she would be certain it behoved her to marry Langley instantly. Indeed, she had visions of a romantic wedding—the bridegroom ghastly, wounded, and bandaged; and herself nursing him well. Over and over again she had mentally walked into Colchester barracks, fallen on her knees by Reginald’s side, and told him she would devote her whole life to atone for the unfeeling words that had caused his terrible accident.

At these times, Sir Ashton Piers faded into the far distance, a sort of ideal hero, too noble for everyday life; besides he was so unselfish himself, he would be sure to think she was right in sacrificing even her love for him to poor Reginald; and some day, perhaps years hence, when she had proved what a good wife she could make, though she did marry from

duty, she might meet her hero again, and be his dearest friend to their lives' end. How poor Reginald would regard such a friendship did not occur to her.

Another day she would picture her life, married to Captain Langley, and not able to care for him.

"I don't know what I should do," she thought; "he would be so tiresome, and worry me to love him, and I should get cross and snub him, and perhaps I should run away with Ashton;—ah! no—he would never do that; well then, I should only want to do it, and that would be nearly as bad. Oh dear, how I wish I knew what was right; one way must be right, and the other wrong; the puzzle is, which is either? Mrs. Studley has quite taken against poor Reginald since he tried to kill himself, though that is just the one thing I like him for. She's always talking against soldiers, and says he's a fright now. But then papa declares I must marry some one soon, and I don't like Alfred Grey; he's nice to talk to, but—well, I hardly know—I don't think he feels much about any one. He thinks me tolerably pretty, and it would be a good match for him, and I should suit him as well as any one else, but if I died to-morrow,

he would look out for some one else the next day; not like Ashton Piers, who never cared for but one woman in his whole life. If he only liked me ever so little, I would never look at any one else, but he does not. I daresay he has forgotten all about me. I wonder—is it better to go on liking him all my life, and be an old maid, and grow cross, disagreeable, and prim; or to marry some one else, and try and forget him? I do wish I might see Reginald once more; I could decide much better afterwards.”

So mused Geraldine, till a longing to see Captain Langley again took possession of her, and grew stronger from the account Mr. Grey gave when he came back to Wrinkleburgh, leaving the invalid to be nursed by his mother. Twice he went over for the day to see his nephew. The first time, Geraldine hinted and suggested that she would like to go too; the last time, she point-blank asked him to take her with him. Neither hint nor entreaty had any effect. Mr. Grey told her that her going was inexpedient from all points: it would be painful to her, it would revive and strengthen poor Langley’s folly, besides putting into people’s heads that an engagement existed between the two. Mr. Grey would not take her to Col-

chester without the earl's express permission, and, Lord Everingham being in Paris, this could not be obtained.

Geraldine cried and tormented herself, fidgeting about all day. She drove to the station to meet Mr. Grey on his return, questioned him closely, and elicited the fact, very unwillingly told, that Langley had asked particularly if Lady Geraldine ever talked about him, what she thought, and even if she seemed sorry for his wounds.

"Did you tell him how dreadfully sorry I am, and that I wanted to come and see him!" Geraldine exclaimed, looking at Mr. Grey, as if to read the answer in his eyes.

"I said you seemed sorry for him, and were always very polite in asking after him," answered Mr. Grey, in tones studiously quiet, and calculated to soothe his companion's excitement.

Just after quitting Langley, Mr. Grey was never quite so fond of Geraldine as he was at other times. He did not exactly blame her, even to himself; still it had been a sad business, and, remembering poor Langley's scarred face, it was impossible for male humanity not to disapprove strongly of the cause of those frightful wounds. If Reginald's arm or leg

had been broken, or he had given himself a mere flesh wound, his uncle would have been loud in denunciations of his folly, aye, and wickedness too; but looking at the poor fellow now, he could only pity him, and feel, illogically, that however much some person was to blame, that one was hardly Reginald Langley.

Marmaduke thought this as he drove back to Wrinkleburgh, and had little compassion for Geraldine’s pitiful face, and for the tears she was determined not to shed, which stood in her dark eyes.

“Kind and polite!” she kept repeating to herself. “What hateful words! Poor dear Reginald! he will think I am cruel, and cold, and heartless, and he is so ill too. I don’t care what people say—let them talk as they like—I will tell him I am—oh, so sorry! If Mr. Grey won’t take me to see him, I will go by myself. Where is the harm? I shall do none. Let people object as they may—I will go.”

All that evening Geraldine was very quiet, meditating over her plan. She said little in answer to Mrs. Studley’s questions, and rather sharply interrupted that good lady’s regrets at Captain Langley’s madness.

“I don’t call it mad; most people with any

hearts at all, do queer things sometimes, and other people call them mad. What does it matter if they do! If one stopped to think of that, no one would do anything but cold, heartless, stupid things."

Thus speaking, Geraldine was unconsciously defending her own thoughts and plans, more than Langley's actions. She went to bed, still determined to go to Colchester, and settled exactly in her own mind how everything should happen.

She would travel in the omnibus that left Wrinkleburgh for Boxworth Station, and meet the eleven o'clock train; arrived at Colchester, she would be sure to meet one of the Hussar officers. She would ask after Captain Langley, and calmly say she had missed her train, and had an hour to spend, perhaps it would amuse the invalid to see her, and on her return to Wrinkleburgh, she could tell Mr. Grey how his nephew was. Nothing would be easier or more natural. Colonel St. John, Captain Downe, or any one else, would escort her to the barracks; and Reginald, she thought, would be so glad to see her. She need not say anything; he would understand, by her coming, that she meant to cancel what she had said. He would be sure to ask her again;

but this time, thinking as she did just now, she would say "yes."

It was all so easy in theory;—and in practice, too, the first act of the play went perfectly. A note, placed among Mrs. Studley's other letters, told her not to be uneasy or say anything—Geraldine was going to see some friends, and would be back before tea-time. The omnibus reached the station punctually, and the train arrived safely at Colchester. So far things went prosperously—here came the hitch. Geraldine alighted.

"Have a hansom?—want a cab, miss?—get your luggage?" greeted her from eager porters; but not an officer she knew seemed about. Refusing offers of cabs, she walked to the ladies' room, and from its window surveyed the station. The train sped on, the platform cleared; several young men, evidently officers, departed in various traps; no one was left save a few porters lounging about.

What should she do? It had been so thoroughly part of her plan to meet one of Langley's brother officers at the station, she was prepared for no other contingency. Rapidly she resolved possibilities in her mind. Should she take a cab, drive boldly up to the barracks, and ask for Captain



Langley? How could people know she was not his sister, or his cousin, or any one but herself—Geraldine Everley? Or should she walk through the streets, and take the chance of meeting some one she knew? Surely, of all the Hussars she had met, one at least would be walking in the town. The last plan, she thought, seemed the best; and, feeling nervous and solitary, she emerged from the shelter of the waiting-room, crossed the platform, and meeting a porter, inquired the way to the town.

“What part of it, miss?” he naturally asked.

“The principal street, I mean.”

“Lor, miss, do you mean High Street? maybe you’re a stranger? It’s a good step from here to the High Street.”

“Which is the nearest way to the barracks?” Geraldine next inquired, and her face grew crimson at the man’s saucy look.

“Oh, it’s the barracks you want to go to, miss”—the porter gave a sly wink, as if to say, “It’s come out, has it!” “The barracks isn’t near High Street. You see that road; go straight along it till you come to some large gates, with a sentry walking before ’em, and them’s the barracks;” and the man laughed.

Geraldine felt furious at his impudence. She turned, and, walking quickly away, addressed a policeman, standing outside the station. Of him she inquired the way to High Street; he pointed out the road, gave her some further directions, and she started.

Was it the porter’s impudence that upset her nerves, and made her fanciful, or did the passers-by stare strangely at her? Geraldine Everley was not the sort of girl that generally walks alone in a garrison town; so, perchance, the good people of Colchester did look surprised. At any rate she fancied they did, and grew frightened. Was she doing a very odd thing? Would people think it bold and fast? Would Captain Langley himself wonder at her?—and oh, would Mrs. Langley, his mother, be surprised to see her? Somehow Geraldine felt that men were more likely to understand the feeling that prompted her to do this, for Langley’s sake, than women.

As she traversed the busy streets, she grew more and more nervous every minute. Many officers passed, most of them in undress uniform, and they looked, or seemed to look at her oddly. One remarked aloud, “That’s a pretty girl;” and she felt, more than saw, that two others turned round after they had passed,

and followed to see where she went to. Her face grew crimson; she felt inclined to cry. She hardly knew which street to take, and feeling desperately that she must sit down somewhere, and think what to do, she espied a confectioner's shop, and turned quickly into it.

The shop was a large one, and ordering a cup of tea and some buns, she pointed to a little marble table in a distant corner. The waiter placed a chair close to it, and she sat down; the buns were placed before her, and while she waited for the tea, she grew calmer. It was so silly to be frightened at nothing; many girls walk about alone. What harm could happen to her? Thus re-assuring herself, she began to nibble a bun; when, who should come into the shop, but the very two young men she had noticed walking after her. They looked about, as if searching for something, till their eyes lighted upon her. One of them ordered cherry brandy, and the two lounged up and sat down at a similar table within a few yards of hers.

Again she felt her face flush, yet how ridiculous it was! Why should not two men come into the same shop, if they wanted anything? Yet why did they stare so?—and one

nudged the other, and looked at her and smiled, as if he expected her to smile back again. First she turned away, then she looked straight before her, trying all the time to appear unconscious of the eyes fixed upon her. How she blessed the waiter bringing the tea, as, for the moment he put down the cup, his figure hid her from those four staring eyes; but then, one of the horrid young men actually got up and handed her a sugar-basin. He did not speak, so what was there to annoy her? yet she could have thrown the sugar-basin at his head. She said “Thank you,” in a voice meant to be very cold and stiff—the trembling in her throat made it low and sweet. Choking and miserable, she hardly knew what it was that made her so hot and indignant, yet she felt the young men would not have looked at her like that if she had not been alone. She turned her chair away, and took up the cup.

“Allow me to get you some milk, or shall it be cream?—they have capital cream here, I can recommend it,” the horrid man asked, standing before her, and she was compelled to answer.

“No, thank you,” she said, and turned away.

“Shall I get you an ice? I can recommend

them too ; I know this place well," he went on, still standing close, and still looking at her.

His words were perfectly respectful, and, in truth, there was no harm in the conceited good-looking boy. The was young enough to fancy himself a terrible Don Juan, and not experienced enough to see the difference between the girl before him and the young ladies he was accustomed to meet by themselves in confectioners' shops. This was an uncommonly pretty little thing, he thought, and her apparent shyness made him feel a terribly wild fellow that any girl must be afraid of—being just the sort of young man that a sharp barmaid would snub and patronize to any extent. He was charmed to think himself a terror to a woman ; so he went on, speaking in a persuasive, and, as he thought, fascinating voice.

"If you will allow me, I will bring you the very thing this shop is famous for—chocolate creams ; they are so good in tea ; do try one, just one, to please me."

Geraldine could bear it no longer. She started from her seat, walked across the shop, trying vainly to conceal her fear, hastily put on the counter a shilling, and, too nervous to

wait for the change, hurried out of the shop, and almost ran into the arms of an officer in undress uniform, walking in the opposite direction.

An exclamation, a momentary feeling that her worst fears were going to be realized, and herself murdered in the streets of Colchester; one glance at the terrible enemy, and instant relief darted into the frightened face, and she put out her hand with an incoherent gasp of pleasure.

“Lady Geraldine!” exclaimed the stranger, almost as surprised as herself.

“Oh, Captain Downe, I am so glad to see you. I have lost my way, and—and—I was getting so frightened.”

Downe had plainly noticed the terror; he interrupted—

“Believe me, you are quite safe; allow me to accompany you. Where are you bound for?”

Geraldine hesitated. She could not think what to answer; she forgot all about missing the train and what she had previously settled to say, and only stammered out the question—

“Do you know where Mrs. Langley lives? I mean, where she is staying?—Captain Lang-

them too; I know on, still standing her.

His words, truth, though good-looking fancy expressed his love. Good-naturedly he concealed his suspicions, and answered as if rushing about the streets of a garrison town inquiring after a lover was an everyday occurrence.

"Mrs. Langley is at the barracks looking after her son; probably you have heard of his accident? He is getting better now, but it is dull work being laid up; it would be a charity if you went to see him, as well as his mother, Lady Geraldine."

"I am doing the thing capitally, manœuvring like an old woman, to give the poor fellow a pleasure," thought Downe; while Geraldine thought her companion the best friend in the world.

The two strangely-met companions walked on together; Downe talking all the time of Langley, praising his friend's good qualities, and declaring he was the most popular fellow in the garrison. At length they reached the

ock gates. Downe led the way across the square to a side door in the officers' barracks. He spoke a few words to a soldier standing there; the man disappeared, and came back, followed by a soldier servant.

"Is Mrs. Langley at home?" Downe asked the new comer.

"She's in the captain's room, sir," was the answer.

"Show this lady to her sitting-room," the officer said, stepping back for Geraldine to pass first. Downe followed her along a passage and into a room, where a work-basket and some ladylike writing materials betrayed its feminine inmate.

"If you will sit down here, Lady Geraldine," Downe said, "I will go and tell Mrs. Langley," and he was gone.

Outside Reginald's door he stopped. "I suppose I had better not tell him," he muttered; then calling a servant, sent him into the next room with a message, that "Captain Downe wished to speak to Mrs. Langley." The lady appeared, and Downe, sinking his voice to a whisper, said—

"A friend has come to inquire after Langley. I dare say you've heard of Lady Geraldine Everley; poor Langley is always talking about her."



The corners of Downe's mouth twitched; it was not in human nature to suppress a smile. Mrs. Langley was surprised. Marmaduke Grey had told his sister the story of Reginald's love, and the invalid's manner, when she hinted at her knowledge, convinced Mrs. Langley that her son's attachment was as strong as ever. So she could not but feel pleased to see the girl for whose sake Reginald had endured so much; yet it would be well not to rouse Captain Downe's curiosity about this visit.

"I will come directly," she replied, appearing unconscious of his looks of fun. "I dare say Lady Geraldine has a message from my brother. It is very kind of her to come and see me. I shall ask her to see Reginald too; a visitor will amuse him, and make the weary hours less long."

Mrs. Langley, as she said this, was conscious that she had not in the least convinced her son's friend that Lady Geraldine's expedition was not a romantic one, and also a foolish thing to do on her part.

One person, however, was extremely grateful for Mrs. Langley's tact. Geraldine had waited in nervous suspense, wishing, over and over again, that she had never come, almost

inclined even then to rush away, to go anywhere rather than be obliged to explain to Reginald's mother why she had come.

Mrs. Langley came into the room with outstretched hands.

"I am so glad to see you," she said, drawing the girl to her, and giving her a warm kiss. "I seem to know you quite well, my dear, for Gertrude Grey has written to me so much about her friend, and it is quite cheering to see any one besides the doctors. Sit down, and take off your hat, and then I am going to ask you to come and see Reginald; he is so dull, poor fellow, obliged not to move all day. He will be charmed to see a fresh face.

Mrs. Langley was obviating all awkwardness very kindly, and Geraldine grew less conscious of her imprudence, and was quite her own rather saucy self when she followed Mrs. Langley to the invalid's room.

Reginald was sitting, propped up in a large arm-chair, his head turned so that the bandaged side of his face was hardly visible. His mother went forward.

"Reginald, I have brought you a visitor. Don't move your head or you'll do yourself harm. You must tell Lady Geraldine Everley

that, though you are getting better, you are not able to be very polite ; there !—don't twist about." She turned to her visitor. " Come on this side, Lady Geraldine, and don't let him turn round."

Reginald was by no means a repulsive invalid. Wounded as he was, his head was supported by the back of the chair, and from where Lady Geraldine stood, only the unwounded side of the face was visible, and that was beautiful, with its perfectly chiselled features and marble paleness.

The excitement of the moment brought, for a second, a faint flush into the deadly white cheek. Geraldine put out her hand ; he clasped it tightly in both his, and not liking to pull it away, she stood by his side, not speaking, only looking at him with intense compassion : the first words came from him.

" I thank you," he said earnestly, and lifted her hand to his lips.

Here Mrs. Langley interposed ; a scene like this was highly injurious to the patient.

" Now Reginald, she is tired and cold, don't keep her standing." She pushed a chair forward, and took another herself close to the fire.

" Now, my dear, tell us all the Wrinkleburgh

news; if I do not know the place, Reginald does, well; he will like to know what you have been doing there.”

Mrs. Langley talked till her son got over his first delight at seeing Geraldine, and the latter answered composedly. The conversation was principally between the ladies, for the soldier contributed few words. He lay back, feasting his eyes on the face he loved so dearly, and feeling, with serene delight, that she would hardly have come there if she did not like him a little.

Presently Mrs. Langley observed to her visitor—

“I shall order you a cup of tea and a sandwich,” and she left the room.

“Geraldine, darling!” exclaimed Langley, almost before the door closed behind his mother, “how good it is of you to come and see me!”

“I was so sorry for you, indeed I was; I have been wretched. I thought, perhaps, I made you do it. It was horrid of me. Will you forgive me?”

“Forgive you!” he replied, pressing her hand, till it was almost painful; “it would be the happiest day of my life, if you would say you liked me ever so little. Won’t you

say it just once? You say you are sorry for me?"

"Indeed I am, and—I—I—yes, I do like you; I do, indeed. Don't be angry, for I don't know what to say. I will do anything you ask, if you will only get better and never do such a terrible thing again."

"Then I'm the luckiest fellow in the world, and I'm glad I made myself a fright. Don't you remember once saying you liked ugly men? I'm that now; but you like me better than you did, don't you?"

"Oh, a great deal better," exclaimed Geraldine; glad that she was able to satisfy his *exigeante* love on one point at least.

A few more words, and everything might have been explained and settled, when in came a servant with tea, followed by Mrs. Langley; and that interruption changed the course of their two lives for many a year.

No more words had they alone that day, for it was nearly time for Lady Geraldine to return home. She drank the tea hastily, wished Captain Langley "good-bye," drove with Mrs. Langley to the station, and reached Wrinkleburgh before eight o'clock.

To Mrs. Studley she triumphantly detailed her expedition, now that it had ended so well.

She recollected little of its uncomfortable commencement ; the die was cast, she had as good as said she would be Reginald Langley’s wife. Of course he had understood it so. It was with relief, as of one delivered from doubts and perplexities, that she felt she must marry him now. He had been so devoted ; he loved her so dearly ; surely she ought to accept the affection lavished upon her ; she would be a good wife to atone for the past. And her remembrance of Ashton Piers, and her longing for his love, should be a vision of unattainable happiness, a height of bliss to which she could by no possibility reach. That other love should be everything to her now, and she would forget that she had ever liked another than Reginald Langley.

So resolving, and fancying that she could give her affection to whom, and in what proportion, she chose, Geraldine Everley talked of Captain Langley, insisting upon Mrs. Studley acknowledging that he was everything good, wise, and handsome. And when the worthy governess dissented from the last adjective, for she understood from Mr. Grey that his nephew had made himself a frightful object, Geraldine exclaimed—

“He is much more manly-looking ; the

only fault in him before was his extreme beauty."

"Well, my dear, if you think so, I have no more to say, but it puzzles me. When the young man was attractive, and I confess I thought you could not but like him, you despised and rejected him; now that his own conduct has shown your wisdom in that rejection, you are bent upon marrying him. I cannot understand you."

Geraldine flung her arms round the governess's neck.

"Perhaps not, you dear thing. I don't think I understand myself."

So saying, she took up a candle and departed to her room, tired, but decidedly satisfied with this day's work.

## CHAPTER VIII.

"I HEARD HIM SAY IT MYSELF."

"Thro' slander, meanest spawn of Hell  
(And women's slander is the worst),  
And you, whom once I loved so well,  
Thro' you, my life will be accurst.

"Henceforth I trust the man alone,  
The woman cannot be believed."

TENNYSON.

A RUMOUR of Lady Geraldine's visit to Colchester, and that an engagement was imminent between the earl's daughter and the disfigured officer, reached the Blu'sters. Clarissa exclaimed—

"That horrid girl will get him, after all!" Wildly she appealed to her mother—"it must not be; it shall be stopped."

"You are right, Clarissa, it shall be stopped. Reginald Langley shall never marry Lady Geraldine!" Mrs. Blu'ster's face was very



dark as she spoke, and she set her teeth with hardened determination.

The love had need be strong, the lovers wise, as well as determined, when Mrs. Blu'ster put forth all her power against them. Reginald's passion was strong as death, but he was not wise, while Geraldine in this matter hardly knew what she wished; therefore small chance had they against such an enemy.

"Leave all to me," went on the old woman, interrupting Clarissa's violent protests against Langley's folly, and threats of her own vengeance.

The daughter knew her mother's talents, and readily acquiesced. So long as the match was stopped, she did not care how it was done. As Langley would not be forced to marry her, Clarissa, he should not have any wife, least of all, the girl he loved so desperately. There was nothing of love, of jealous affection in this. Clarissa had not even such poor excuse; she did not care one atom for Reginald; had he lain dead at her feet, she would not have shed a tear; but he had balked her plans, he loved her detested enemy; she hated him now; she would have killed him had she dared.

With angry vehemence she spurred on her mother, declaring that he would tell of

their doings at Blucastle ; how he and Lady Geraldine and the Greys would laugh at their manœuvres, and repeat scornfully their attempts to catch him.

Mrs. Blu'ster heard, and stronger grew her resolve that it should never be. If there already existed an engagement between the two, it should be broken ; if it was only intended to be an engagement, it should never go beyond intentions. Rapidly she reviewed her means of action ; though it was seven o'clock in the evening of a December day, she put on her bonnet, and walked across Fort Hill to Mrs. Morris.

That good woman was in no fit order to receive visitors ; she had been bustling about all day, altering furniture and pictures in her tiny drawing-room, and was now lying down on a sofa in the aforesaid room, in a morning wrapper and slippers.

The sound of the bell roused her ; she hastily called over the stairs to the servant, to say she was engaged. Mrs. Blu'ster sent up word she wished to see Mrs. Morris particularly.

"Say I cannot see any one—I am lying down with a bad headache," screamed Mrs. Morris.

"I must see you, Elizabeth," answered Mrs. Blu'ster, passing the servant; and, deliberately mounting the stairs, into the drawing-room she walked, kissed Mrs. Morris, and took a seat on the sofa.

"Elizabeth," she said, "it is nonsense trying not to admit me; what do I care for your dressing-gown? though I must say it isn't a pretty one. Now, tell me—have you heard about Lady Geraldine? You visit her, I believe?"

"What about her? I've heard nothing." (Mrs. Morris was always eager for gossip.) "I thought you did not like her, Mrs. Blu'ster."

"No more I do. Perhaps I know more about her than you do; but whatever I think of her goings on, doesn't prevent my feeling sorry at a misfortune overtaking her, and doing my best, as a Christian, to prevent it."

"Oh yes, dear Mrs. Blu'ster, I know you would help any one; so would I," exclaimed Mrs. Morris.

She herself always felt whatever people told her they did; now she was burning with a desire to do something for Lady Geraldine, because Mrs. Blu'ster pretended the same. Had the older woman come, as she had often done before, to denounce the earl's daughter,

and propose injuring her, Elizabeth Morris would have been equally ready ; taking action in regard to her neighbours was her delight ; it did not matter whether the action was to save or ruin them.

"Tell me what you think of doing," she exclaimed.

"I don't think of doing anything, because I do not know Lady Geraldine, as you do ; if I did, I should go directly, and tell her what I know, and what you know too, of Captain Langley. I would never let a young girl, whoever she might be, make herself miserable for life by marrying such a man. Alas ! I do not know her." Mrs. Blu'ster was quite pathetic.

"But I do. I could tell her anything—indeed I am quite ready to do it." Mrs. Morris was eager to speed that moment on her mission of warning. "Tell me, Mrs. Blu'ster, what you would say about Captain Langley ?"

"Say ! my dear Elizabeth, just what you know about him. Surely you would not let that poor girl" (Geraldine was quite an angel in Mrs. Blu'ster's eyes now) "make herself miserable and him too, by marrying a man, who told you himself he would only marry her from honour, because he was bound to

do it. You know, Elizabeth, he told you so himself, and declared the only reason he could not marry Clarissa, as he wished to do, was that he was obliged, absolutely compelled, to offer to Lady Geraldine Everley. Think what a blessing it is, that Clarissa would not take him."

Mrs. Blu'ster ignored facts; she knew Mrs. Morris dared not contradict her, and would actually believe and repeat her version of the story, if it was steadily dinned into her mind; the wily old woman went on, putting her face close, and whispering into Mrs. Morris's ears.

"I must tell you, Elizabeth, that wild young man actually tried to shoot himself rather than marry; but Mr. Grey went over and declared he must, and should, marry the girl, and the earl threatened a breach of promise. I know this for a fact; and Gertrude Grey went on her knees to beg him to take her friend. I don't know, I'm sure, what makes them all so anxious about it; it looks queer." Mrs. Blu'ster gave a knowing wink. "Perhaps there's more than you guess; something to hide, I dare say. Officers are all immoral, and I don't think much of the young lady; she hasn't her queer looks for nothing; but, whatever it is, I don't pretend

to say but I do think it's a duty to tell her that the young man doesn't care about her. Ah! Elizabeth," Mrs. Blu'ster looked pathetically at her companion, "if you'd seen all the misery I have, from marrying without love, you would save these two poor people from making themselves wretched."

Mrs. Morris was charmed: here was a grand opportunity for action. It was her place to warn Lady Geraldine; it was her absolute duty to repeat what she had heard with her own ears. Mrs. Blu'ster had so determinedly expressed her view of the case, that Mrs. Morris was convinced of its truth, and she was quite ready to declare she herself had heard Captain Langley say exactly what Mrs. Blu'ster asseverated he had said.

It was always so with Elizabeth Morris; din anything into her head, and, however preposterous it was, she would believe and act upon it. Before Mrs. Blu'ster took leave, Mrs. Morris had promised to go next morning to see Lady Geraldine; nay, she was eager to go before breakfast, had not Mrs. Blu'ster, anxious to conceal her own part in the affair, suggested it would be better to wait till twelve o'clock.

Some time before that hour, Mrs. Morris

wended her way to Granite House. Geraldine received her in her naturally pleasant way—she knew very little of her visitor. Mrs. Morris had called once before, and the visit had been returned, and they had occasionally exchanged a few words when meeting in the town. Their acquaintance being so slight, Lady Geraldine was extremely surprised when, after a few remarks about the weather, etc., Mrs. Morris rose, took the girl's hand in both hers, and said—

“Dear Lady Geraldine, I'm sure you will believe I take a deep interest in you; indeed I do, though, perhaps, I did not call at first; I assure you it was from no bad motive. You will not be angry with what I am going to say?”

“No, certainly not,” answered Geraldine, who was rather touched by the other's friendly manner.

“Then, dear,” went on Mrs. Morris, “I must tell you why I have come. If you were my age, and had seen all the misery I have from ill-assorted marriages, you would not wonder at my trying to stop yours.”

“But I am not going to be married,” interrupted Geraldine, not knowing to whom Mrs. Morris referred.

"Then I am in time," the other said. "Let me beg you not to be persuaded into accepting Captain Langley; indeed, my dear, you would make both yourself and him miserable. I know for a fact that he loves another young lady, only he feels bound in honour to offer to you. You see, soldiers think so much of honour; and people tell him he ought to do it. But you would not like to accept a gentleman on such terms, would you?"

"Of course not," exclaimed Geraldine, her cheeks flashing in proud surprise; "you may be certain I will never marry any one who dreams of such a thing." Here a suspicion of the truth of Mrs. Morris's words came to her, and she added, "but I do not believe Captain Langley would do so. Please, Mrs. Morris, explain to me what you mean, for I do not understand. Who is the lady you say he likes? and why should you suppose him likely to ask me, if he cares for some one else?"

"My dear Lady Geraldine, men do strange things continually. You never know what a man in love will do; but I will tell you all about it: Captain Langley came to my house one day—I dare say you remember the time, for he was engaged to go with you and the



Miss Greys somewhere ; but instead, he was obliged to come to me to explain his feelings about Clarissa Blu'ster. He talked a long time—I cannot tell you half he said—but he ended by declaring that he wished very much to marry Clarissa, but unfortunately he had offered to you before, or somehow made you understand he meant to ask you, and so he felt bound to go on with it. Of course I could not say anything against that, for he was quite right, and very honourable and straightforward I think. He asked me to explain this to Clarissa, and so I did, and made the best I could of it all for the poor young man."

Mrs. Morris poured this out in a number of jerky sentences, and very pale grew Geraldine Everley as she listened. Could it be true? Had Reginald actually spoken so of her?—really sent Clarissa Blu'ster such a message about her?

Injured pride, and a conviction that he would not, could not, act so horridly, made her loth to believe. She did not speak directly Mrs. Morris ended ; she only drew away the hand the little woman still clasped ; and after a moment's silence, said in a low voice—

"I do not, I cannot, believe it ; it is some mistake."

"I declare he said it to me. He used the actual words that he was bound to marry you. I heard him say it myself." Mrs. Morris grew vehement in her wish to destroy this girl's trust in her false lover.

"Nothing shall make me believe it, unless he acknowledges it himself. I will ask him," Geraldine answered firmly.

"My dear young lady, let me entreat you not to say a word to Captain Langley. Of course he never meant me to repeat to you what he said; indeed I never should have done so, only Mrs. Blu'ster thought you ought to be told, and that it would not be kind or fair to let you marry him without knowing. No doubt he will offer to you; he told me he should do it most certainly, as a positive duty."

Mrs. Morris spoke terribly plainly, and Geraldine felt her trust in Reginald sinking before this declaration of his unfaithfulness. She made one more effort.

"Are you certain? Will you declare to me solemnly he said so?" She looked earnestly at Mrs. Morris; supposing it was untrue—some trick of the Blu'sters—surely Mrs. Morris's face would betray the deception.

"I declare to you, I'm ready to swear that

Captain Langley said to me these very words, "I am bound in honour to marry Lady Geraldine."

There was silence; neither spoke. Mrs. Morris sat, radiant with satisfaction; her action had been so effective; she had done her duty so solemnly, so boldly, so thoroughly like a Christian. She had defeated the plans of an immoral officer; she had given a worldly, frivolous daughter of the aristocracy a chance of becoming, through disappointment, a humble Christian. Elizabeth Morris had fulfilled her mission; Mrs. Blu'ster would be satisfied; and her own conscience said, "Well done!"

A chill blank feeling of disappointment and shame crept over Geraldine; disappointment in Reginald, and shame at herself for caring what he had said of her, for resenting too that he should prefer Clarissa Blu'ster. She could not doubt, after Mrs. Morris's words, yet a tiny thread of trust in her lover remained. She rose, and walking to the window to hide her face from Mrs. Morris's fixed gaze, said slowly, almost painfully—

"I cannot quite believe it, until he says so himself. I will ask him."

"You surely will not do such a thing," exclaimed Mrs. Morris.

Mrs. Blu'ster's last injunction had been to take care that Lady Geraldine promised not to say a word about the interview to a living soul; so her instrument was bent upon extracting that promise; she went on volubly—

"Of course I trusted that you would not repeat anything I said in confidence, or I should never have told you one word. If you do not care what you yourself say to Captain Langley, you have no right to use Clarissa Blu'ster's name, when she behaved so well too, and would not take the man because he had to consider your claim."

This was intolerable: in passionate scorn Geraldine exclaimed—

"My claim indeed! as if I ever did or should claim Captain Langley. You may tell him from me not to trouble himself about an impossibility. I am no more likely to marry him than I am a shoe-black." She drew her small figure up proudly, her eyes flashing; she crushed down the rising sob, and spoke loudly and vehemently.

"My dear, I am so distressed," began Mrs. Morris, who repented her own work, when she saw her companion's agitation.

"There is nothing to be distressed at," answered Geraldine; "I am much obliged to

you. I have no doubt you meant kindly, though your warning was hardly required. I assure you, Captain Langley and I are the last people to suit each other; he is simply a cousin of my friends the Greys, and I shall never regard him as anything else. Decidedly neither he nor Miss Blu'ster need remember my existence. I hope never to have the slightest influence upon, or interest in, their plans or feelings."

Lady Geraldine was recovering from her first indignant surprise, and becoming coldly polite. She never could like Mrs. Morris again, and as for Captain Langley, she resolved never to speak another word to him. She put aside, with lofty coldness, the excuses and condolences Mrs. Morris could not refrain from pouring out, till even she could not but perceive that her absence was desired, and rose to take leave. Lady Geraldine escorted her to the door, shook hands stiffly, and spoke coldly and very gravely—

"Mrs. Morris, if Captain Langley should speak to you again about me, will you be kind enough to tell him, from me, he is quite at liberty to marry Miss Blu'ster whenever he likes, and I shall be glad to hear of their marriage." Then opening the door, and

perceiving rain was falling, she offered an umbrella with the iciest politeness.

Mrs. Morris did not know what to make of this change. The passionate girl transformed into a block of marble. But when she reported the whole affair to Mrs. Blu'ster, that acute old woman concluded that the poisoned arrow had gone deeply home, and she was right. I do not believe any power on earth could have persuaded Geraldine Everley to say a kind word to Langley after that interview with Mrs. Morris. She never again asked Mr. Grey of his nephew's wounds, and she would send neither message nor letter to Captain Langley or his mother.

The moment the soldier was sufficiently recovered to bear a railway journey, he came over to Wrinkleburgh. Lady Geraldine refused to see him under the plea of keeping her room with a bad headache. It would have been well for these two lovers had Mrs. Morris also felt a headache. Unluckily she was well and active. She saw Captain Langley arrive at the Blue Lion. She followed him to Granite House. She watched him out again in a few moments; she pounced upon him, walking across the green to Dinorlan.

"You here! Captain Langley! I hope you

are better. I have a message for you from Lady Geraldine. Have you seen her just now?" She felt sure he had not.

"Not to-day," he answered; "she is not well. I shall see her to-morrow, for I am going to spend a few days at my uncle's."

"Let me beg of you, Captain Langley, to go back to Colchester," exclaimed Mrs. Morris.

The soldier looked surprised. "Why?" he naturally asked.

"Because it will spare Lady Geraldine an uncomfortable scene; she does not wish to marry you, and she asked me to tell you so. I had rather not repeat her exact words, but that is what they meant."

Langley was thunderstruck. It was so unlike Geraldine to send such a message; yet he thought Mrs. Morris could hardly have invented it; besides, he had a suspicion that Geraldine's headache was only an excuse to avoid seeing him.

"What did she say?" he asked nervously.

Mrs. Morris paused till the suspense grew unbearable.

"Tell me; speak her exact words," he repeated.

"Tell Captain Langley, from me, he need

not think about an impossibility. I am no more likely to marry him than I am a shoe-black."

"I will never believe she said that!" exclaimed Reginald. All his nature instinctively revolted against the notion of Geraldine—his so loved Geraldine—speaking such cruel words.

"Then ask her yourself if she did not," Mrs. Morris sharply said, feeling angry at the soldier's unbelief.

"So I will," he said, and, lifting his hat, walked rapidly away.

To Dinorlan he sped, put Mr. Grey aside with a hasty greeting, and, seizing pen and paper, wrote—

"DEAR LADY GERALDINE,

"Did you send me a message by Mrs. Morris? Please give me a word in answer.

"Yours,

"REGINALD LANGLEY."

No more: he did not believe she had sent the message, and he would not insult her by writing the words she was supposed to have spoken. He took the note himself imme-



diately to Granite House, and waited for a reply. He had not long to wait. A tiny three-cornered note was put into his hand; tearing it open, he read—

“Yes; I did.

“GERALDINE EVERLEY.”

Langley crushed the paper in his hand; his face as ghastly as when he lay wounded in his barrack-room that December morning.

Like a tipsy man he staggered down the path, through the gate, and to the Blue Lion. In a voice so hoarse that the waiter remarked, “What a cold you have, to be sure, captain!” he ordered his dog-cart to be brought round; stepped into it, took the reins mechanically, and drove to Boxworth, travelled to Colchester, and that evening sent in an application for six months’ leave.

He was still on the sick list, and did not stir from his room till the required leave was sent. Then he went abroad, and was not heard of by any one for months; but he left behind him a letter to be posted after his departure.

It was addressed to Mr. Grey, and briefly explained that, not being yet fit for duty,

he was going on long leave; would his uncle wish everybody at Wrinkleburgh good-bye for him? He mentioned no names, and said nothing of the cause of his departure, or when he would return.

The letter arrived the very day Caroline and Gertrude returned to Wrinkleburgh from Grantham. Their father gave it to them to read, and Gertrude showed it to Lady Geraldine, but the latter gave no explanation, and seemed strangely uncommunicative on the subject of her rejected lover; and the sisters, having the affair between their brother Alfred and Rosa Thompson to explain to their father, were too busy over their own family concerns to talk or think much of Reginald Langley.

The money arrangements with Mrs. Thompson and her daughter were by no means easily or speedily settled. Mr. Grey, when asked to do so by Caroline, flatly refused to give the sum of money—two thousand pounds—his daughter had previously promised to Mrs. Thompson.

"It is perfectly absurd!" he exclaimed. "Am I to give thousands every time a son of mine chooses to make a fool of a silly girl? Flirting is expensive at that rate."

For some time Caroline urged the danger they had escaped, and that, if this sum was given, Rosa had promised to become Mrs. Mills immediately. What would have been the consequences if Alfred had really married her? Finding her father still obstinate, she was unwillingly compelled to whisper to him a sentence Mrs. Thompson, with many tears, had spoken to her. Mr. Grey did not answer for some minutes: then he said gravely—

“I must give the money. But, Caroline, you have no business to let her marry Mills.”

“My dear father, pray do not begin upon that. It is all settled. It is the only thing to make the matter safe. Supposing she were unmarried when Alfred comes back, we might have it all over again.”

“Wrong can never be right, Caroline. What do your sisters say?”

“I have not told them. Father, let it be buried between you and me. Why need the others know of Alfred’s faults?”

“Caroline, my dear, you take a wrong view of all this; you think so much of saving our family pride, you forget Alfred’s—sins, I should call them.”

“Father, there is no other way out of this. I have done the best I could.”

"I know you have, my dear, and, indeed, you have had a trying time. I wish I could have spared you. But, Caroline, beware of doing evil that good may come. If you insist upon this marriage, suppose some great evil comes of it."

"If I do not insist upon it, the evil that will most certainly come will be Alfred marrying her after all. I declare you are far worse to manage than Mrs. Thompson."

"My dear, I leave it all to you," was Mr. Grey's only reply."

Four days later, Caroline followed her father into the library.

"I have written to Mabel, and Rosa has promised to tell Mills all," she said. "Will that satisfy you?"

"Yes, if she does tell him—which I doubt."

"Father, you are most provoking. If you are not rejoiced that your son has been saved from disgracing our name, you ought to be."

And Caroline marched out of the room with her head in the air, and a great deal of rustle about her movements; indeed, her exit had as much flounce about it as her good-breeding was capable of. Mr. Grey turned with a sigh, and took up a book, murmuring—

“When you have lived to my years, you will know there are other things to be considered besides family pride. God grant the old name may pass untarnished in my son’s time, but I fear——” the rest of the sentence he spoke only to himself.

Miss Grey went to Grantham to deliver the required money to Mrs. Thompson, for she could not be satisfied without seeing for herself that Rosa was safe in Yorkshire while Alfred was abroad, and she hurried on the preparations for the day that was to convert dangerous Rosa Thompson into harmless Mrs. Tom Mills.

Caroline remained at Grantham till the wedding, which took place in Cairnham Church, and it must be confessed that it was with feelings of relief, as of a great danger escaped, that the sisters—Miss Grey and Lady Grantham—watched the girl, who might have been their sister-in-law, converted into Mrs. Mills.

The bridegroom’s grave face was radiant with satisfaction; not so the bride. Her pretty features wore a strange look of discontent and disappointment, hardly a pleasant face to greet a loving husband; but Tom was

unconscious of anything amiss, for his was an unsuspecting nature. The sudden hurrying on of the marriage, which even his slow mind could not but feel Rosa had hitherto shrunk from, awoke no surprise in Mills; he never pretended to understand his pretty sweetheart; it was enough for him that she was willing, at last, to be his wife; he wanted nothing more. That she did not love him, nay, that she shrank from his very presence, was the last idea to enter his head; of course she liked him, or why did she marry him, and he resolved that Mrs. Mills should be the happiest of women.

Poor Tom! how little he knew of the deceitful, unhappy girl he loved so deeply!

Rosa safely married, Caroline wrote to Alfred, entreating him to come back to England, and hinting that now he might have a better chance with Lady Geraldine, for Reginald Langley was gone; and Grey, tired of travelling about, and tempted by the prospect of renewing his flirtation with the earl's daughter, and perchance bringing it to a successful issue, gladly returned to Wrinkleburgh.

Geraldine welcomed him with pleasure, for she was feeling listless and dull, and Alfred,

for whom she never cared seriously, amused and cheered her spirits. Resolutely she had cast Reginald Langley out of her thoughts, for was he not unworthy? Had he not actually preferred such a creature as Clarissa Blu'ster? Had not his love-making to her been a sham? Indignation and wounded love caused her to think bitterly of him; for, to a certain extent, Geraldine had loved Reginald, though not in the same way that she cared for Ashton Piers—the first man who had touched her heart—the man she still loved far more than any one else.

As Reginald's memory grew dim, a vision of Sir Ashton came back. Affection for him had always lain in the depths of her heart, though it had been suppressed and overspread by a warm appreciation of Langley's passionate admiration. Now that Geraldine believed in her ardent lover's falsehood, her heart flew back to the grave baronet. If he did not profess much, he was true, she felt certain; he might like her only as a friend, but his honest friendship was, she thought, worth more than Reginald's professions. So Geraldine steadily built airy castles, in which Sir Ashton loved and married her, and at the same time she talked and flirted with Alfred

Grey; and Mr. Grey and Caroline agreed that their cherished project would yet come to pass, and the earl's daughter become the wife of the heir of Breffny.



## CHAPTER IX.

“BEHOLD, HOW GREAT A MATTER A LITTLE FIRE  
KINDLETH !”

“Your love and pity doth the impression fill  
Which vulgar scandal stamp’d upon my brow,  
For what care I who calls me well or ill ?”

SHAKSPEARE.

MR. GREY sat in the drawing-room of Dinorlan awaiting dinner. He had been snipe-shooting, and getting thoroughly wet, changed to his evening clothes somewhat earlier than usual, and now sat reading a magazine, wondering at his daughter’s absence. The clock pointed to half-past six, yet they did not appear. Presently the front door opened, hurried steps ran up the stairs, and Caroline and Gertrude came in—Caroline with her eyes flashing, and that peculiar quietness of movement that with her always denoted strong feeling.

Gertrude was too excited to wait a moment before pouring her tale into her father's ears.

"Father! what do you think we have heard?" she exclaimed before she was half through the doorway. "We always, both Carrie and I, have been sure that the people here thought something queer about dear little Jerry, and we've heard it to-day. It's all that horrid, abominable old woman——!"

Here Caroline's voice broke in.

"She's the wickedest creature I ever heard of! She ought to be made a public example of."

"And we'll make her!" exclaimed Gertrude, as she walked to the fireplace, took up the poker, and administered several vigorous pokes to the fire, emphasizing her words.

"My dear," observed Mr. Grey, "if it's a satisfaction to put that fire out, pray do it. I suppose you feel you are attacking this enemy that has turned up, otherwise I should prefer your leaving the coals alone, and then, perhaps, you will tell me what all this is about—who has been exciting your wrath? and where have you been this afternoon? It will soon be dinner-time; may I ask if you intend appearing in your hats and jackets?"

"Father, don't make me laugh, I don't feel

as if I ever should laugh again. I'm so savage, I don't know what to do."

"Quite so;" ejaculated Mr. Grey, though, through his amusement, he wondered at his daughter's anger; Gertrude, at least, was not often given to such language or such temper.

"Now," she exclaimed, "I'll tell you—I know you will not like it either: Carrie and I went at four o'clock to tea with Miss Canary; presently she began talking about Geraldine when she first came here. Miss Canary has often hinted before that she could tell something. I'm not particularly fond of her; she's always hinting and suggesting little spiteful things about people; still we have long wanted to find out what made the people so queer to the Everinghams when they came, for now they seem half frightened at them; so, by little and little, I got it out of Miss Canary. I believe she has had a bit of a row with that abominable woman herself, for she told us with great delight, yet was evidently half afraid of its effect. Actually that horrible Mrs. Blu'ster said the most atrocious things about Geraldine—I could not tell you half. She ought to be hung."

"What kind of things?" asked Mr. Grey.

"Why—well—she said Geraldine was not

Lord Everingham's daughter; but—well—she lived with him, and was not his wife, you know; and that she was quite wicked. I mean—not a respectable kind of person at all, and—oh!—horrible things!"

"What?"

Gertrude, when she said her father would not like it, was right enough. Even in her excitement she started at Mr. Grey's voice, as, springing from his seat, he confronted his daughter.

"Gertrude, tell me exactly, word for word, what Miss Canary said. If she could tell it to you, you can repeat it to me—mind, exactly."

And Gertrude obeyed the stern voice, so unlike her father's usual tone.

"Miss Canary told us, in a great many words and sentences, that Mrs. Blu'ster said that Geraldine lived with Lord Everingham, and poor little Nellie was her child, and quite a little child; and no one went near them, because they were said to be like that. Was it not an awful shame? Can't that atrocious woman be punished?"

"By Heaven! yes, and she shall be!" Mr. Grey's face was anything but pleasant to look at. In temper he was slow to rouse; it took a great deal to anger Marmaduke Grey; he was

too good-hearted to take offence easily ; but a thing like this, a dastardly slander, struck a chord that nothing would ever smooth again. He did not need the spur of Gertrude's words.

"Poor dear Geraldine is quite horrified, and Lord Everingham is angry, that's one comfort."

"How does he know ? You don't mean you have told him ?"

"Yes, we did." Mr. Grey held up his hands.

"What possessed you to do it, Gertrude ?" Don't you know Everingham is the greatest fool alive ? Why did you not tell me first ?"

"Well, I meant to, but as we were coming home, we met Jerry at their door, so of course we told her, and Lord Everingham too, when he came in ; we've been there all this time. I don't consider Lord Everingham cares half enough for Jerry generally, but he's rather nice about this ; he declares he will go and set upon Mrs. Blu'ster to-morrow morning. I wish I might go too."

"So do I," added Caroline. "I never could bear the sight of that vulgar Mrs. Blu'ster ; now I detest her and the whole family."

Whilst his daughters talked in this style, bringing up every moment fresh instances of

the Blu'ster vulgarity, and the Blu'ster malice, Mr. Grey thought over his plan. His invariable counsellor was Gertrude, especially since their poverty had taught Marmaduke Grey his younger daughter's cleverness; now, he wanted to talk this over with her. All his best nature was roused in defence of Geraldine, Gertrude's greatest friend, his son's hoped-for wife.

Though quick enough on small matters, Mr. Grey was deliberate where his feelings were strongly moved. Caroline was no good in an affair that required skill as well as power. Mrs. Blu'ster was a very clever antagonist; one to seize upon and turn to her advantage a single false step. Naturally Mr. Grey felt, as a man open and honest, he was no match for this intriguing female enemy; but Gertrude, with her quick insight into character, was as honest, as open, as fiery as himself. Yet she combined with these a woman's unerring instinct, and a large proportion of that quick penetration into other people's motives, that makes a clever woman of the world a match for a dozen men.

On Gertrude Mr. Grey relied, as the director of the attack he resolved upon Mrs. Blu'ster's mischievousness, and now he was anxious to

talk to her by herself. Caroline's impetuous nature was ready to listen to no arguments, no plans for obtaining witnesses of the slanders; she would have attacked the Blu'sters immediately, trusting to force of character to carry her through. In this case that would hardly be the way to effect their ultimate downfall.

Fortunately, Alfred Grey's appearance diverted Caroline. She rushed into a vehement account of the afternoon's revelation to the new comer, and left her father and Gertrude free to discuss the best plan of action. Both agreed that the earl was not fit to manage this alone: had he taken moderate care of his children all this could never have happened. Mr. Grey was strong on this point. Gertrude did not see it; she estimated better Mrs. Blu'ster's strength. True, perhaps, a good father might have sheltered Geraldine from the possibility of some of the slanders; might have more quickly discovered Mrs. Blu'ster's malice, and so prevented its extreme development; but she was inclined to care little for what had been, and was now irrevocable, and devoted all her energies to their unscrupulous enemy's punishment.

In the midst of the discussion, dinner was announced, much to Caroline's horror, for

not even Mrs. Blu'ster's enormities could excuse in her eyes a break in their ordinary habits.

Caroline's stateliness was sometimes tiresome, and Gertrude's nature inwardly revolted against it, yet in practice she generally yielded, confessing that it was necessary, with their present limited means, to keep up the family dignity; so now, much as she wished to act immediately, she curbed the impulse, and, except for the morning dress, dinner passed off as usual, nothing occurring, as Miss Grey observed, to make the servants suspect that anything had happened; yet all were glad when the door closed upon the last tray, and they could resume the discussion.

Eventually Mr. Grey put on a great coat, and went over to Granite House to talk to the earl. He found Geraldine and her father full of the subject, but there was not half the indignation that moved his own family. The earl was angry, but his anger was not all concentrated on the Blu'sters; his daughter came in for her share, for letting things get to such a pass, as if she could help it, poor child; the people generally, for listening to her lies, as well as Mrs. Blu'ster for inventing them. The earl was indignant, though his rage was



much cooled by thinking of the trouble the whole affair would involve. He even at first felt annoyed with the Greys for finding it out, till Mr. Grey's hearty manner, and the strong feeling he displayed for the Everinghams—taking it as a personal matter to himself—soon removed the earl's irritation. He confessed himself puzzled as to the best method of punishing Mrs. Blu'ster, and was glad enough to excuse his indolent selfishness by implicitly following his friend's plans.

The earl's first notion demonstrated he knew nothing of the workings of Wrinkleburgh society. His idea was to go to Herring Villa, tell Mrs. Blu'ster she had behaved disgracefully, and demand a public retraction of her stories: there his plans stopped.

Mr. Grey might well exclaim: "Much Mrs. Blu'ster would care for that!—she would purr round you, and talk nineteen to the dozen, and apologise to you, and what good will that do? She will only turn your going to her into another proof of her power. That woman is a great deal too sharp and unscrupulous to do anything but write to; what she writes back you have in black and white, and it commits her; what she says, she'll deny the next minute. Before tackling her—what about the

evidence? Who do you rely upon as a witness of her stories?"

"Why, Miss Canary, of course, she told your daughters plain enough; besides, if the lies were spread as wide as she says, there must be heaps of people to speak to them."

"I'm not so sure of that; remember, Wrinkleburgh is not celebrated for moral courage. I should not be surprised if no one would come forward to face Mrs. Bluster; she has a knack of getting at the raw in every person, and hitting that. I feel pretty sure Miss Canary would not stand in a court to what she told my daughters. It's true enough, of course" (as the earl looked in astonishment); "but remember, no one with much moral courage or honour would have let Mrs. Blu'ster rule and bully as she has done. You look surprised, my good fellow; you haven't studied Wrinkleburgh as I—or rather Gertrude has. I confess, during the nine months we have been here, I should have seen no more than you have except for Gertrude; it requires a woman to discover the ins and outs of a place like this. Gertrude, in age, might be the old woman's grand-daughter, but she's as sharp as Mrs. Blu'ster, though, thank Heaven, she's a totally different woman. Still she can tackle her, as I

don't profess to do, so I go by her opinion. She says, and so do I, that Miss Canary is slippery; she was annoyed with the Blu'sters this afternoon; Clarissa was very rude to her one day last week—that's the Blu'sters' way; they flatter one day, bully the next. As it happened, she could not resist letting it all out to Gertrude, and by this time, I'd bet anything she's sorry enough, and desperately frightened at what she's done."

"Then, if you think no one in Wrinkleburgh will give evidence about that woman, what can we do? Her lies were only spread here, and here alone are the people who heard them."

"We must get evidence from a stranger — one not influenced by this place."

"How?" interrupted the earl.

"Listen to my plan: nothing must be said or done to Mrs. Blu'ster till I've been to Town to see Pole Cattley. You know the man I mean, at least you must have heard of him, commonly called the *Polecat*. He keeps a private inquiry office in —— Street. He's the cleverest fellow in the world for managing a case like this. I shall tell him the whole history, and employ him to work it, and we will have a public apology, and such an exposure of Mrs.

Blu'ster as will put an end to her bullying, or we'll have the woman up in court, charged with malicious libel and slander."

"And swinging damages," cried the earl, whom the thought of money reconciled to anything.

Marmaduke Grey was disgusted. He liked the earl, had known him for years as a pleasant companion, amusing, full of anecdote and wit, never at a loss for fresh ideas. So Grey had just such a liking for him as we have for one whom circumstance, not choice, has made our friend. For his character, his real nature, Grey had a great contempt; for the man, as he generally was, pleasant, amusing, and good for nothing, he had a great liking; but every now and then the earl would say something, show some view of life, that made Grey wonder how he could keep up his friendship for an hour. This was one of these occasions; Marmaduke had no patience with him, and spoke out as he seldom did.

"Damages! no indeed! Do you think I'm going to allow your daughter's name to be bandied about in a court, if I can help it? I believe, if we manage properly, we can punish Mrs. Blu'ster without that. If it must come to an action,—and it's a risk—for it may, you

ought not to touch the damages. Give them to some charity, I say ; I wouldn't soil my fingers with Mrs. Blu'ster's money. I should be ashamed of the whole thing, if you did."

Lord Everingham kept his temper—he always did when it was an advantage to him ; it would never do to annoy Grey, the friend he relied upon to pull him through this mess. He took his companion's lecture good-naturedly, and laughed as he answered—

"Suppose we don't bother about damages till we see a chance of getting them ; counting chickens before they're hatched, eh ! If all goes well, there will be no question of damages, but I should like to know when you propose this visit of ours to your private detective. I presume you mean me to go too ? "

"No, I don't. I want to do it myself. Look here, Everingham, you're not a good hand at this ; let me manage it."

"Certainly, my dear fellow, only too glad ; for, as you say, it is not in my line ; only"—he hesitated—"you see, Grey, you're such a reckless fellow about money. There now, you look disgusted at my taking money into consideration in such an affair, but I'm obliged ; it's all very well, but I literally haven't any money to spare for expensive law proceedings. You

wouldn't have us all done for by debt—a nice triumph for your friend, Mrs. Blu'ster!"

"Confound your nonsense, Everingham! Can't you be serious?"

"Well, I am serious enough. I can and will pay moderately to punish the detestable old woman; but it's no good making Geraldine a beggar for the rest of her life, just to revenge her upon her enemy."

There was sense in the earl's view, Mr. Grey was forced to confess, and his strong feeling prompted him to answer the objection in a way the earl little expected.

"I say, Everingham, if you tell me what it ought to cost you, I'll not let the expense come to more; at least," he added, "if I do, it's my affair. You see it will be an occupation to me. I'm sick to death of this place, with nothing to keep one's mind awake; a little more would make me ill with weariness; to attack Mrs. Blu'ster will save me a doctor's bill. I'm sure I ought to help to pay for it."

Grey need not have made so many excuses; the earl was not troubled with any scruples as to allowing another to revenge his wrongs; he made a faint protest for the sake of appearance.

"It's very good of you, Grey, but I can't

quite have that. You see, unfortunately, it has nothing to do with you."

"Hasn't it though? Don't we all of us care for Geraldine? and you and I are old friends. Mrs. Blu'ster has tried to attack us too, though not as badly as you, the intention was the same; and besides, I say, Everingham, I suppose you guess, it's plain enough to see, that my boy Alfred is fond of your dear little daughter. I conclude you have no objection."

"Certainly not!" exclaimed Lord Everingham cordially, thinking of Breffny and Cairnham. Marmaduke Grey might for some years be comparatively poor; when he died his son would be rich again—it would be a capital match for Geraldine.

Grey, pleased with his companion's warmth, went on—"Well, if those two make a match of it, Mrs. Blu'ster's conduct concerns me just as much as you, so you cannot mind my lending a hand."

The earl's objection was mere pretence, so now he gracefully gave in, and allowed his friend to undertake the trouble and expense, which should have been his own. Much he marvelled at that friend's quixotic generosity, but if he would be such a fool, so much the better for himself, thought Lord Everingham.

"Just tell me what I am to do, and I'll do it, Grey, even if I have to give up seeing my mare win at Baden-Baden, as I know she will, next week."

Marmaduke, on his part, wondered at the nature of the man who could so lightly weigh his horse's racing against his only child's reputation; still it was as well to prevent Mrs. Blu'ster's getting the slightest hint of her foe's proceedings. The earl was best away from Wrinkleburgh just now, so Grey told him; and it was agreed that Lord Everingham should carry out his settled plan, and go abroad the next week, engaging to come back on receipt of a letter from Grey; the latter promised to start for London two days later.

This settled, Mr. Grey pushed his empty wine-glass away (he and the earl had discussed their plans over dessert), shook hands with his host, and adding—

"I will go and wish Geraldine good-night," repaired to the drawing-room to see how the innocent object of Mrs. Blu'ster's malice bore the discovery of her enemy.

Poor Geraldine! it had been to her an evening of perplexing thought. When the Grey sisters first told her, their anger infected her, their affection seemed to weigh down—



almost obliterate—other people's dislike, and Geraldine, like her friends, talked of nothing but punishing her malicious foes. When they had gone came a change. It was Geraldine's first experience of this world's evil, and there is something very sad in the conviction of malice around you, the young are so ready, so resolved to think happily of life; to Geraldine the world had seemed first quietly peaceful, then delightfully pleasant. Her love for Sir Ashton Piers cast the first shadow, then Reginald Langley's faithlessness; yet her naturally buoyant, hopeful disposition drew in bright colours a picture of eventual happiness. By nature she always saw the bright side of everything; here started before her an abyss of wickedness that nothing could close, a dark picture that nothing could brighten, a depth of hate that no kindness could bridge over.

"How could they do it?" she kept saying over and over again. The enemy that had attacked her for months had been an enemy close to her, injuring and slandering her. Geraldine felt like a child that had lost its way in a haunted wood, with unseen dangers around and beneath, yet all invisible, unknown. There was indeed one gleam of pleasure—she was glad that there had been a

cause for the people's conduct. After all, their rudeness was not dislike to her; it was not because she was unlovable; it had been a mistake, a terrible one of course, still it was not the people's fault that they were stupid and could not see through Mrs. Blu'ster's stories. Geraldine was glad of that. When these stories were set right, as Gertrude Grey had declared they should be, the people would be different. Geraldine relied on Gertrude—the noblest, the dearest friend she had; she clung to her doubly now. How Gertrude had kissed and defended her! How she had soothed and petted her! How she had turned upon Lord Everingham, when he blamed his daughter for not finding this out before! Her father blamed her, Geraldine knew, yet she could not help it.

Geraldine sat by the fire, while wave after wave of thought swept over her mind, each darker than the last. How miserable everything seemed—her father angry, the enemies active, all the world suspicious and unkind! Over and over again came the question: Had Sir Ashton heard these slanders? Could they have had anything to do with his not caring for her?—could they possibly? As she looked back, she was sure now it was these terrible

things that were said about her that made Mr. Forbes so odd ; so fond of her one day, so embarrassed the next. She did not care—Mrs. Blu'ster might say what she liked to Mr. Forbes ; but had a whisper reached Sir Ashton ?

“ He did not believe them, I'm sure. He did not dislike me, I'm certain ; but was it this that made him not like me ? I thought he did at one time, then he altered ; had he just heard these things ? ” thought Geraldine, little guessing the contempt with which Sir Ashton, as a man of the world, would have stopped Mrs. Blu'ster's lies, had he heard them. To her they were terrible : had they not been believed for months ? Besides, did not the Greys think them most injurious ? Were they not violently angry because they were so believed ? If these slanders had reached Sir Ashton, he might think, as many people did, there must be something wrong, to give rise to such stories. Had not Gertrude said so, when Caroline stormed at the idea of any one listening to Mrs. Blu'ster ?

Geraldine's tears flowed fast, and she locked her hands in agony, as she thought of Ashton Piers' contempt. No ; he would not surely feel that for her. He was too generous. He

would think kindly of her, she knew, and make the excuse of her bringing up, and be sorry for her; but he would compare her to his wife—that dead rival that Geraldine envied so—who had been so loved and mourned.

Geraldine knew by Mrs. Studley's description that in appearance she was wonderfully like Marion Piers. How well she remembered Sir Ashton saying she reminded him of some one he once knew; and when she asked who, could she not almost see again the stern look of pain on his face, as he walked away without answering. He thought her outwardly like the wife he loved so dearly; might he not compare them inwardly? Would he think of his wife, so good, so true, so untouched by the world's evil tongue? then would he believe Mrs. Blu'ster, and think of her, Geraldine, as so black, she who loved him so much—far better than his wife had ever done, she thought? Oh, it was unfair; it was a shame that she, who had tried to do right, should be so slandered!

Geraldine sprang up and paced the room, her whole nature aflame with the injustice. Why did God allow such things? Why did He not interfere? Why did He not stop such

wicked people? How could He let Mrs. Blu'ster triumph? Surely she was wicked! Surely she ought to be punished!

Ah! Geraldine had not yet learnt that God's ways are not our ways; that His plans are as far above our finite imagination, as His mercy is above our poor comprehension.

Geraldine paced up and down in hot indignation. Over and over again did she think of every word, every look, during those last days of Sir Ashton's visit. Had Mrs. Blu'ster made mischief there? if not, Geraldine would forgive her everything else.

Generous and forgiving, though fiery-tempered, Geraldine Everley was not revengeful. Her own wrongs she resented far less than she would have resented the same wrongs done to others, all but this one wrong. If Mrs. Blu'ster had done this—if Mrs. Blu'ster's slanders had actually stood between Geraldine and her first, her only real love—here was a wrong she could not, would not, ever forgive. So she thought now, knowing little of her own heart—its anger, or its power of forgiveness. She thought and thought; then she sat down on a low stool, and buried her face in her clasped hands, her heart full to agony, of jealous anger, and passionate love, and miserable doubt,

chasing each other through her puzzled brain.

The large tears trickled through her interlaced fingers, and she never heard the door open or a footfall in the room, till she started with a half-suppressed scream, as a hand was laid on her shoulder. Geraldine's nerves were strained and overwrought, and they failed her now. Mr. Grey was shocked at the pitiful worried face that was lifted suddenly.

“Lady Geraldine, my dear child—forgive me for calling you so ; but, my dear, you shouldn't look like that ; there's nothing in an old woman's spite to take to heart. When you've lived my years, you will know there's nothing too false for a detestable old woman to invent, but no one minds what she says. Surely you don't mean to worry yourself. Why, your father and I have talked it all over, and, my dear, you may be sure we shall take care of you ; can't you trust us ? I think it was a pity you were alone when you first came here—that was the fault of circumstances, and will not happen again ; depend upon it, it will do no harm in the end. My dear,” he added, taking her hand and speaking gravely, “it may puzzle you now, and you may think it hard all this should have hap-

pened, but can you not believe, as I do, that it will all come right at last; that some day you will be glad of what pains you now? Ah! you think—never; but you don't know, as I do, that nothing ever happens except for our good. There, my dear, I'm not going to preach; I'll leave that to Gerty, she's first-rate at it—yet——” here he looked straight into her eyes, “I have never found her belief wrong, and she says, you will laugh at this trouble before very long. Now, good-night, dear! and don't take it to heart, for that's more than it deserves.”

A hearty shake of the hand, and Mr. Grey was gone, murmuring as he went downstairs—“If ever a woman deserved hanging, it's that confounded Mrs. Blu'ster.”

Ah! Marmaduke Grey, you can talk of charity, and all for the best, to Geraldine, but there's plenty of anger still left in your heart to make it a great pleasure to detail to Gertrude your capital plan for Mrs. Blu'ster's punishment; and you may be sure your daughter's ears will be wide open, eagerly attentive to every detail.

The next morning, before breakfast was over at Granite House, in walked Gertrude. She affectionately scolded Geraldine for her red

eyes and depressed air; then she set to work to cheer her friend: she laughed and joked, made fun of Mrs. Blu'ster's spite, and sarcastically pitied the poor dear injured Blu'sters; "so hurt, you know, at Lady Geraldine's dislike, and those horrid Greys' meddling."

Gertrude was angry enough at the enemies, but she would not allow that their malice was worth shedding tears about; and finding all her jokes useless, she said a few grave words on the duty of bearing quietly this little trial. She would not allow it was a great one; "great trials," she said, "are troubles to our loved ones, or ourselves; sins of our own, or our friends, not sins of our enemies. If we have not done wrong, we may be sure the trials will pass away quickly; and it is not right to take a little nasty thing like this as if it were a serious grief." The rebuke was very gently put, yet it struck just the right chord.

Geraldine was in a state of nervous suspicion. She had discerned nothing for so long, now she was bent upon discovering what did not exist; it was the re-action from over-trust to suspicion. Well for her that she had at this time a steady, sober-minded companion, one who felt deeply, yet justly, who saw both sides, and could even now see just a spark of



excuse for the Blu'sters', and gave her despised enemy just one little bit of credit for not having devised it all at once. It had grown, no doubt; one false statement compelled another, as deceit always does.

Caroline, when she followed her sister, would hear of no excuse. To her, Mrs. Blu'ster was the incarnation of everything wicked. Gertrude hated the sin, perhaps more than her sister; yet, through it all, she could pity the sinner.

"She must have had a miserable time lately," she observed. "How she must have dreaded our finding it out. I have noticed they all looked frightened and odd at us. I suppose that is what they fear."

"And so they ought, the horrid wretches! I can't think how you can defend such people."

"I don't defend them; I only say, perhaps they are not quite so black as we paint them."

"They're a thousand times blacker," exclaimed Caroline.

Her sister only shook her head, saying no more, yet the discussion did Geraldine good; her spirits revived. In the effort to appear not to care, to satisfy her friends, she really contrived to forget the cause, and soon was laughing and talking merrily of other things.

The sisters carried her off to luncheon with them at Dinorlan; there she had to listen to another opinion—Alfred's. He, of course, expressed his intense disgust, with many a hint at how it especially affected him. Still, Alfred never took a serious view of anything; and perhaps his light talk did more than anything else to dispel Geraldine's idea that these dreadful stories must always come into people's minds at sight of her. Evidently Alfred Grey, though he knew all, thought very little about it; and Geraldine, at least, could not believe that was because he cared little for her. No! she felt he liked her too well for that. His was not the indifference to her welfare that hurt her so in her father.

Alfred Grey thought little of Mrs. Blu'ster's lies, because, to men of the world, they were manifestly untrue and absurd, and Geraldine grew happy and comfortable again—for she thought, if Alfred thinks so, Sir Ashton, with double his sense, will think so too; and her face brightened.

Grey was decidedly pleased; his vanity took credit for the change in his lady-love; he was sure she was comforted because he did not mind it—because Mrs. Blu'ster's spite made no difference to his love: it was a game of

cross purposes. Well for Alfred Grey that he always loved himself far better than any one else, or the dis-illusion, when it came, would be heavy with sorrow.

No more was said.

Lord Everingham departed to Baden-Baden; and Geraldine, Caroline, and Alfred were given to understand that all plans for the discomfiture of Mrs. Blu'ster must remain in abeyance till Lord Everingham's return: to Gertrude alone was confided the exact truth.

Mr. Grey spent two days in London, and on his return had a long whispered talk with Gertrude; but to the others he said not one word of his visit, and things went on just as usual. Only a week after Mr. Grey's return, Wrinkleburgh was charmed with the unusual apparition of a stranger—a young man who took up his quarters at the Blue Lion, scrupulously attended the daily church service, was seen to offer a tract to the barmaid at the Lion, was believed to have remonstrated with an irate sailor on the beach, pointing out to him the extreme wickedness of swearing, and consequently was pronounced by Wrinkleburgh generally, and especially by the Blus'ters, to be a "very good young man."

This personage—James Mottley by name—

did not confine his goodness to frequenting church. After two days' attending there, and one appearance at a prayer-meeting, held in the school-room, he delighted Miss Blu'ster by addressing her after the meeting, apologizing for so doing by an allusion to her well-known charity and care for the poor, and begged to be allowed to call at Herring Villa to consult her upon a little donation he hoped she would consent to distribute for him among her poor.

Miss Blu'ster was in ecstasies; no one had ever suggested to her such a thing before. Cordially she invited Mr. Mottley to the Villa next day, and when he arrived, Mrs. Blu'ster and her daughters received him with delight. Jane Blu'ster had vainly endeavoured to persuade Clarissa, that, as this was a case of charity, it belonged exclusively to her own department—she, Clarissa, cared nothing for the poor.

“No,” answered Clarissa; “but if I care nothing for your absurd charity, I care a great deal for young men. Do you think I shall let you have this one all to yourself? No, indeed.”

Mrs. Blu'ster seconded her younger daughter; in her heart she, too, cared nothing for charity,

but she shrewdly guessed, that a young man so disposed to give, must be well provided with the good things of this world. He might be turned into a son-in-law, and Clarissa should see him ; for her elder daughter, Mrs. Blu'ster had long ago despaired of a husband ; with Clarissa there was still a possibility of success.

Accordingly, Clarissa, in a most becoming dress, sat alone—gracefully posed on a sofa—when the footman announced Mr. Mottley. A good ten minutes of conversation the mother allowed before she and Miss Blu'ster made their appearance. Clarissa had not wasted the time. The visitor was obsequious to Mrs. Blu'ster, listening attentively when, according to her usual practice, she gave the stranger a long account of the different branches of the Blu'ster family, and their good connections.

No one of these latter had taken the slightest notice of Mrs. Blu'ster, since her son's marriage put an end to the only thing for which they had ever vouchsafed to notice the *ci-devant* Miss Prettyman. What did that matter ? Mrs. Blu'ster talked familiarly of charming Lady This—and dear Lord That : the young stranger could not be aware that

she knew them only by name. It answered her purpose.

Mr. Mottley showed a warm interest in Jane's description of her charities, her poor, and the parish generally; but it was to Clarissa he turned when he spoke himself; to Clarissa he detailed his own plans of—as he expressed—doing good in his generation; to her he spoke, with many a text and pious saying, of the responsibility he felt for “the income that had been vouchsafed to him.” He did not say what that income was; yet from his conversation the Blu'sters surmised it was a very comfortable one. His whole appearance and talk conveyed the idea of a religious enthusiast, a godly, evangelical, simple young man, with little knowledge of the world, wrapped up in his pious crotchets, and anxious to do good in the only way he conceived good could be done—namely, “preaching the pure gospel.”

Much he enlarged on the dangers of popery, strongly he urged that clergymen were often weak guides to Rome; his trust was in lay preaching. How Clarissa seized the opportunity. No word she said of her love of amusement, her longing for the vanities of life; her fastness, her loudness, were all

dropped ; meekest, most pious, most evangelical of women, was Clarissa !

Jane stared in amazement to hear her sister talk of her district, her poor, her love for souls. Clarissa ! who never entered a cottage, who openly laughed at and ridiculed her sister's rôle of "female curate !" here was Clarissa, not only a "curate," but actually professing a wish to be a female "preacher of the gospel !" and arranging with this young man a prayer-meeting, to be conducted expressly by their two selves !

The stranger insisted upon the success certain to follow Miss Clarissa's efforts to save souls. Clarissa was charmed ; before her mental eyes passed a delightful vision : she would devote herself to his work ; she and Mr. Mottley would be associated in this preaching, this charity ; might it not end in she and the stranger being associated for life ? Yes, what so likely ; and then—ah ! it would not be much of the Mottley wealth that the poor would share. Clarissa, as Mrs. Mottley, would soon stop that. Would not her carriage and horses, her dress and luxuries, swallow up the whole of the worldly goods that young Mottley said now he felt it his bounden duty to lend to the Lord ?

Very pious in the Blu'sters' eyes, very profane to a thinking mind, was James Mottley's conversation, with its pharisaical humility, its misapplied texts, its satisfied hypocrisy.

Miss Blu'ster was disappointed; she never ventured to imitate Clarissa's fast young ladyhood; what business had Clarissa to take to her charity? When, on taking leave, Mr. Mottley presented Clarissa with a five-pound note, begging it might be devoted to Clarissa's district, Jane could hardly bear it. What a shame it was, for Clarissa had no district! What did that matter? Clarissa knew she could, the very next day, make Mr. Shirkwell allot her one, or, if necessary, she, with her mother's help, would appropriate Jane's; she did not care which. She smiled cordial thanks, she looked unutterable things straight into Mr. Mottley's face, and she returned with interest the pressure of Mr. Mottley's hand, when he squeezed hers.

Clarissa was one of those, who think love-making a woman's department, realizing Mrs. Poyser's opinion, when she asks—

“Why will young men run after young women, when, if they will let them alone, the young women will run after them?”

Clarissa acted upon this principle. Men did



not make love to her—she only wished they would; so she undertook the love-making herself.

Mr. Mottley seemed to like it though; he arranged to come the next day to settle the hymns for the future prayer-meeting. He shook hands cordially with Mrs. Blu'ster, politely with Jane, affectionately with Clarissa, whispering in the latter's ear a request that she would remember him in her prayers that night. Clarissa's prayers were apt to be of the shortest description, yet did she whisper back a pleased assent, and begged him to pray for her.

How delighted she was! How Mrs. Blu'ster too rejoiced! Under the influence of her mother's prophecy, that Clarissa would soon be off their hands, even Miss Blu'ster brightened up: how pleasant, she thought, home would be without Clarissa's fretful temper, Clarissa's perpetual complaints!

The prospect of a release from her sister's imperious selfishness consoled Jane for the loss of the promised five pounds, which would have been so useful in gaining influence over the poor. As for Clarissa, she triumphed openly: all the evening she practised chants and hymns; away were packed her comic

songs and Christy Minstrel choruses; the piano henceforward should be devoted to dreary Methodistical melody.

The next day again appeared the stranger; that afternoon, however, he was not quite so pious, his talk verged upon the world, he inquired about the inhabitants of Wrinkleburgh, asked questions about their habits and religious principles, and several times mentioned the Everinghams. All in vain—the Blu’sters were prudent, and even Clarissa indulged in nothing worse than a pious regret at their opposite neighbour’s thorough worldliness.

The next day it was the same. Jane had so impressed her mother with the necessity of caution, the absolute madness of still slandering the Everinghams, that Mrs. Blu’ster allowed no word to be said that could condemn themselves.

The prayer-meeting took place, Clarissa presiding with great pomp at the harmonium. Mr. Mottley’s voice was powerful, his chosen hymns fervent, his preaching—well! what it wanted in power, it made up in noise—the slight temporary desk shook with the vigorous thumps with which he emphasized his words; the roof re-echoed his loud voice, as he

thundered out denunciations against Rome, against sacerdotalism, against everything—but himself.

Evangelical Wrinkleburgh was in raptures; the room was crowded. Had not Mrs. Blu'ster and her daughters scoured the place, visited the cottages, hunted up every available woman, and imperiously ordered every religious man to attend? If a few really good people did observe that Mr. Mottley's language was uncharitable, and that never a word did he say of living well, of setting a good example to their neighbours, of leading honest, sober lives, their protest was drowned in a chorus of the Blu'ster's satellites, who were charmed with their leader's friend.

Mr. Shirkwell was not one of these. He was anything but pleased at heart with this lay preaching; his taste could not but tell him that Mr. Mottley's language was coarse, his texts in many instances wrongly applied. The vicar's common sense (little of it as he had) told him such an exhibition was not good for, but really pernicious to, true religion. Yet what could he do? Had not he, Cyril Shirkwell, thrown in his lot with the Blu'sters? Had he not agreed that his only safety, his only chance of managing the parish, lay in

implicit obedience to them? And could he now rebel? No! his conscience spoke, as it often did, though on each occasion more feebly; but he could not, as he thought, afford to listen to it. He had stood so many far worse things from the Blu'sters, he felt he could not interfere now. He was powerless to stop these prayer-meetings, even if Clarissa were to insist upon addressing the meeting herself.

So Mr. Shirkwell, disliking it all the time, joined in it, said the first prayer, gave the blessing at the end, and, true to his wife's policy of expediency, shook hands cordially with the preacher, congratulating him on his success.

Ah! Cyril Shirkwell little guessed at first what his weakness would lead him to in the end. Before he came to Wrinkleburgh, could a wizard have shown him his future course of conduct, he would have shrunk in horror from the picture; yet he did it, he disregarded his conscience, while he whispered to himself, “I only leave people alone, I only let things take their course.” True; but did you come to Wrinkleburgh to let people alone? Was your high commission given to you, the souls of so many entrusted to you, that you might let things take their course?

Alas! no! you find it no easy task to answer for this to your own conscience. Will it be easier, think you, to answer for it at the Judgment Day? I fear not. I fear that Cyril Shirkwell, like many another well-meaning weak clergyman, will have a fearful account to give, not for what he has done, but for what he has left undone.

Outwardly, the prayer-meeting was a success; the Blu'sters were delighted. During the next day's luncheon at Herring Villa, Clarissa declared her pleasure to Mr. Mottley, who was of course a guest—had he not lunched or dined with them every day for a week! To him Clarissa whispered, that—last night had been the happiest time of her life; she was quite carried away with enthusiasm; she never before felt religion so delightful!”

Mr. Mottley expressed his extreme pleasure. What unfortunate impulse prompted him, not ten minutes later, to speak again of the Everinghams, to express his admiration for Lady Geraldine's beauty, and actually to suggest that she should be asked to attend the next prayer-meeting?

Anything but this Clarissa could have stood—this was too bad! Did he, this delightful man, this lover of hers, this rich young

fool she felt so sure of captivating, did he cast an eye on Geraldine? Would he try to make her acquaintance? If he did, was he not sure to fall in love with her? Clarissa knew well her hated rival's charms. Mr. Mottley would be lost to her if he once spoke to Geraldine Everley; the dread of this broke down Clarissa's self-control. It should never be; she would put the possibility of such an acquaintance out of Mr. Mottley's mind once for ever. Jane's lectures on prudence vanished before the terrible prospect, and Clarissa spoke out all the old slanders. Every wicked story that had circulated in Wrinkleburgh about Geraldine was repeated, told plainly, positively. She appealed to her mother, as an authority, and Mrs. Blu'ster, seized with the same fear as her daughter, dreading, like her, to see the prize so nearly gained slip through their fingers, poured the whole into her hoped-for son-in-law's listening ears.

How attentively Mr. Mottley listened? How shocked he seemed! How implicitly he believed the lies! What questions he asked! How wonderfully he drew out Mrs. Blu'ster's malicious falsehoods! Clarissa was satisfied; she felt sure her rival was thoroughly done for—that Mr. Mottley would never so much

as look at her again. She triumphantly exclaimed—

“You will not wish to have that woman at our prayer-meeting now?”

“No, indeed!” was the prompt answer, delighting Clarissa.

Why just then did an odd flash of satisfaction—a look as of a much-desired object safely accomplished—gleam in James Mottley’s keen grey eyes? The daughter never saw it—Mrs. Blus’ter did, and her heart misgave her; she could not say why, yet from that moment she bitterly repented her unguarded confidence in the stranger. For once in her life, she would have given half her worldly income to recall the false words; to be sure that the slanders her reckless tongue had uttered would go no further. Something of this she contrived to hint when she expressed a hope that Mr. Mottley would consider all that had been said as confidential.

“Much as, of course, I disapprove of her, I should not wish to do the misguided young woman any harm. I feel it a duty to tell you, for your good heart might deceive you into countenancing the vice of Granite House, unaware of its evil name; but I am so careful of hurting even wicked people’s feelings, I

should not like you to repeat what I have told you. Can I trust you not to do so?"

"You may be sure I shall not betray a trust," was James Mottley's grave answer, and Mrs. Blu'ster, uneasy as she was, was fain to appear satisfied.

Perhaps her unaccountable dread cast a shadow over them all, for somehow the conversation languished. Clarissa's high spirits and boisterous talk obtained little encouragement from the others even Mr. Mottley did not enter with his usual readiness into her plans. She was bent upon a ten days' mission the next month, to be conducted mainly by Mr. Mottley—of course herself taking an important part. She had spoken about this some days ago, and now was somewhat disconcerted at the answer that the lay preacher could not remain in Wrinkleburgh so long.

"Oh, you must, indeed you must. Think of the good you are doing: the number of people you have converted is quite miraculous; the effect of your wonderful preaching is just like Paul's—the hearers are cut to the heart! Surely you would not leave your spiritual work now—you will stay?"

He shook his head. She went on undaunted—



"Then you must promise to come back on the fifteenth of next month, that is just five weeks hence; you must, indeed. Think of the souls you will save. Promise you will come back."

In plain language, Clarissa thought, "Surely you will not leave without making me an offer. You cannot mean to be so shabby! If not before you go, you must be made to come back and do it."

The answer re-assured her.

"Yes; I will come back to Wrinkleburgh before the fifteenth; that is all I can promise at present."

With this Clarissa was obliged to be content, and after a few more words, Mr. Mottley took his leave.

The next day he pleaded sudden business, and left Wrinkleburgh, promising, however, to return as quickly as possible, satisfying Clarissa by asking permission to write to her on the subject of the proposed mission.

He gave an address in Derbyshire, to which he hoped she would send any instructions she wished him to observe; and though Clarissa was disappointed that he had left without something more definite being settled between them, she expressed every confidence in her

“lover,” as she called him, and told her mother plainly that it would be all right.

Mrs. Blu'ster hardly thought so; yet the hope of having secured an actual lover made Clarissa so much more amiable than usual, that her mother and the family were loth to disturb her confidence. They hoped, they trusted, that she would be taken off their hands, and saw things generally in a favourable light, making little of their doubts, and strongly dwelling upon the satisfactory points in the position.

END OF VOL. II.





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